

I HAVE LIVED AND LOVED

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BY **MRS. FORRESTER**

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GIFT OF
M. G. Luck



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A NOVEL

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NEW YORK

1900



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GIFT OF M. G. LUCK

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I HAVE LIVED AND LOVED

BY MRS. FORRESTER.

CHAPTER I.

A BOWER of roses in the midst of a charming, old-fashioned garden, and leaning back, half reclined, with one arm raised, the open palm supporting her head, the most beautiful woman God ever made.

Thus John Brandon described Vanessa as he saw her for the first time.

"When she saw me," he added, "she started up with a lovely blush, and a look half as though she had been caught in some guilty act, half as if terrified by the apparition of a monster about to devour her. I was the monster," and John Brandon laughed.

It is not, however, from John Brandon that you are to hear Vanessa's story, but from one who knew far more of her than he was ever destined to know.

Vanessa rose, blushed, beautifully to his eyes, agonizingly to her own consciousness, and stood for a moment speechless and confounded. He smiled and addressed her with the easy grace of a man of the world; she responded with the diffidence and confusion of a woman who for the first time in her life meets a man with any pretension to rousing her interest.

For this pearl lies *perdu* in the heart of the country; the furthest excursion she has ever made from the place of her birth is to a small town twenty miles distant. And that only once.

Now that she has risen, John Brandon sees that she is tall, "divinely tall;" as tall as himself, which is not far from five feet ten. But she is so exquisitely proportioned that, far from looking too tall, she would make any other woman, were one present, appear too short.

"I am afraid I startled you," says Brandon, standing at the gate of that paradise of which the Peri is inside. "May I come in and explain?"

And, without waiting for the permission which she is too embarrassed to give, he enters.

"I came to see Mr. Wentworth, but he is out, and I was told that if I would 'step down the garden,' I should find you."

rode over from L—; my name is Brandon. You may have heard your father speak of me. We were very great friends once."

Vanessa is embarrassed. She knows nothing of society nor its ways, but her innate good breeding suggests to her that it will not be complimentary to her guest to tell him that, until this moment, his name has never fallen on her ear.

"My father lives so much in his books," she says, half apologetically.

"Ah!" and there is a slight pause. "We were bosom friends at Oxford—they used to call us David and Jonathan, and, afterward, we traveled together. But that is twenty years ago. Somehow we drifted apart. I don't think, though, that he will have forgotten me. It was only yesterday that I heard his name mentioned, and I felt quite sure there could not be two Ivan Wentworth's, so, on the strength of that, I rode over to-day."

"Yes?"

Vanessa is deeply interested: this is quite an adventure—a distinct sense of gratification creeps through her as she finds herself talking to a man, a real man, not a dried-up old mummy or an inferior, who, to Vanessa's idea, is no more a man than the lackey was to the *grande dame* who originated the oft-quoted epigram. And she can read the admiration which his eyes unsparingly express as well as though she were a woman of the world; for experience in a case of this sort is quite unnecessary even to the most innocent and ignorant of Eve's daughters.

"I dare say papa will not be very long," Vanessa says; and even whilst she speaks there is a sound of the crunching of gravel, and in another moment the friends of yore are face to face. There is a grasp of hands, a light in both men's eyes, as if the parting had been of twenty weeks or twenty days instead of twenty years. Ah! those friendships made at public school and college are cemented by something stronger than later-day bonds! Men who were friends as boys are pretty sure to be friends to their dying day—unless a woman comes between them, and even then they reunite when the cause of estrangement is vanished and forgotten.

Vanessa steals away—not because she would not fain stay, but that a sense of diffidence and shyness makes her feel *de trop*; so she walks off toward the house, whilst John Brandon's eyes regretfully follow her graceful, rather stately movements. She makes her way at once to the old-fashioned, low, latticed-windowed room where she is certain of finding Susan. Susan is nurse, housekeeper, cook, groom of the chambers, friend, *confidante*, all in one—one of those delightful old friends and servants whose irreparable loss at an advanced age is mourned occasionally now in the columns of the *Times*; who used to be in almost every household, and who, in twenty years' time, will be no more than legendary ghosts; traditions ransacked from the limbo of forgotten things by some great-grandmother."

"Susan," says her beautiful young mistress, as she advances

with quickened steps to where her nurse, spectacled and busy, sits repairing the household linen—"Susan, what do you think?"

Susan looks up over her glasses with an expression of affectionate interest.

"There is a gentleman in the garden with papa!"

And Vanessa's large dark blue eyes dilate as she recounts this extraordinary fact. It is extraordinary enough to make Susan drop her work into her lap, cry, "Lor', my dear!" and remain for a minute, with her mouth half open, regarding her nursling.

"They were friends together at Oxford," pursues Vanessa, her excitement rather growing than decreasing; "they used to be called David and Jonathan, and they traveled together, and he heard papa's name mentioned somewhere and he knew it must be papa, and so he rode over."

"Lor', my dear!" reiterates Susan. "Well I never! What's the gentleman's name?"

Vanessa makes a thoughtful little pucker in her brow.

"He told me," she says, musingly. "But I was so surprised I didn't quite catch it."

"Did he come in along of your pa?" inquires Susan, with deepest interest.

"No. That reminds me. He said some one told him to step down the garden. Who could it have been? It wasn't you?"

"Me, my dear!" and Susan bridles a bit. "Well, I hope I haven't forgotten my manners so far, though we don't see company, as to send a visitor off by himself to look for the lady of the house. It can't have been Hepzibah, because though she's gawk enough to have done it, she'd have been sure to run to me with her mouth wide open if she'd seen a stranger. It must have been old Peter, who's got no more manners than a pig."

"Of course I ought to have apologized," says Vanessa, rather concerned. "It was very rude and uncereimonious; but he didn't seem to think anything of it, and I was so taken by surprise."

"I dare say you'll see him again, and you must tell him then," returns Susan, consolingly. "But," as if struck by a sudden thought, "if he was at college with your pa, he can't be a very young gentleman."

"No," says Vanessa, musingly, "I suppose not. And yet, somehow, he did not seem old—not as old as papa by ever so much."

Susan looks up shrewdly.

"Is he a married gentleman, my dear?"

Vanessa's face falls a little.

"I don't know. I shouldn't think so," more cheerfully.

"Here comes your pa up the walk, and in a hurry," cries Susan, rising and putting down her work. "Now, I shouldn't wonder if he isn't thinking of asking the gentleman to stop or something."

The next moment Mr. Wentworth hurries in.

"I've asked Mr. Brandon to stay till to-morrow," he says, looking a little guiltily from one to the other. "I suppose it can be managed."

Susan is one of those delightful people, who are what is called "good at a pinch."

"I'll see about a room at once, sir," she says briskly.

"Thank you, thank you, Susan," replies her master, gratefully. "But"—hesitatingly—"there's—dinner to be thought of. London people, of course, always dine," he adds ruefully, bethinking him of their own customary homely tea.

At this even Susan's cheerful face falls a little.

"Have you got anything in the house?" asks Mr. Wentworth, nervously, with an imploring glance.

"There isn't a bit of butcher's meat," answers Susan, looking rather unhappy at being unable to come to her master's rescue,—feeling, indeed, as servants used to feel, that the honor or disgrace of the house was theirs as much and more than the head's.

"But," brightening, "there's a chicken killed early yesterday morning, and a beautiful hand of pork, and I can make a nice pudding."

The vicar's thoughts traveled mournfully back to past years in which he had been entertained at hospitable boards. Phantom visions of soup, fish, *entrees*, roasts, cross his perturbed brain. But there is no help for it—chicken, hand of pork, and pudding must be his guest's fare to-night; it shall, however, be garnished by the sauce of a hearty welcome.

"Well, you'll do your best," he says, trying to speak cheerfully. "It is five o'clock now. I suppose we ought to dine at seven. I think that is the time people generally dine. Well, I must be going back to him."

And the vicar departs, almost sorry that he has been tempted to offer hospitality to his old friend, since his capabilities are so far behind his aspirations.

John Brandon would have laughed at the idea that a roast chicken, with a beautiful young woman to look at and talk to, was not good enough for any man, even though he was a bit of an epicure and accustomed to be a trifle critical about his dinner. One can have a good dinner any day, but one does not meet a dear old friend—a dear old friend with a lovely daughter—every day.

Meantime Susan bustles about, wakes up sleepy Hepzibah, who is dawdling in the kitchen, with a vengeance, whilst Vanessa, extremely anxious to help, but fearful of being in the way, follows her about at a respectful distance. Suddenly she has an inspiration.

"I'll go and tell Peter to pick a dish of peas, and some lettuce for a salad, shall I?" she says.

"Ay, do, that's a lady," rejoins Susan; "and just you tell him, my dear, not to send in all the old bullets, but to pick some young ones."

Vanessa sails away on her errand, and impresses strongly on deaf old Peter that he is to bring in none but the youngest and freshest peas.

"Why, that's downright waste!" he grunts, "and what's to become of the others? They won't be no younger to-morrow, anyhow."

"We have *company*," says Vanessa, solemnly, and even Peter is overawed by the significance of that expression. Then Vanessa returns to Susan.

"My dear," says the latter, who is busy making a pudding, "it's just come to me that Mary Ann could help us. Now I haven't a moment and I can't spare Hepzibah, though it's little use she is to anybody" (Susan can never keep from having a thrust at her subordinate); "but now if you would just step up and see her I dare say she could let us have something to help the dinner out with. For, after all, what's a chicken among three?"

"Oh, I won't eat any," says Vanessa.

"That 'ud never do. Why, you *would* look like a country miss a-makin' your dinner off biled pork, or else he'd see through your doing it, that you thought there wasn't enough. But Mary Ann's got all sorts of things in tins and pots that she tells me the quality thinks a deal off—nasty messes, I say. Patty something or other and such like. Now if she could let me have one or two and tell me how to serve 'em up——"

"But," puts in Vanessa, dubiously, "we can't take the squire's things."

"Why, bless me, my dear, of course I mean to return 'em, and I'm sure your pa wouldn't stand for a few shillings for the sake of an old friend."

"I'll go at once," cries Vanessa, rather excited at the idea.

"Where's a basket?"

"No, don't you take a basket," replies Susan; "it wouldn't look well if the servants was to see you carry one up and bring it back with you. Mary Ann 'ull find some one to send down with the things."

It is a warm afternoon, and Vanessa has nearly three quarters of a mile to walk to the Hall. The drive from the lodge-gates to the house is half a mile long. By the time she reaches her destination her cheeks are flushed and she is uncomfortably warm. She does not go to the front door, but round to the window of the housekeeper's room. Inside, she sees the portly figure of Mrs. Marter, or Mary Ann, as Susan calls her, for they are sisters.

"Why, my dear," she cries, at sight of Vanessa standing at the open window, "is that you?"

Even Susan herself has not a warmer love or admiration for the child both have known and petted from infancy than Mrs. Marter.

"Yes," answers Vanessa, sitting on the ledge and letting herself down into the room.

"Why, how warm you are! Now why do you go tearing about on a day fit to brile the life out of you?"

"Because something's happened," says Vanessa, mysteriously. "Only think, Mary Ann, we've got *company*; a gentleman from London to dine and stay the night."

"Why, whatever will you do?" cries Mrs. Marter. "I do hope ne- Susan's got something to give him fit to eat."

"There's a chicken and a hand of pork and a pudding," says Vanessa.

"Why, don't tell me that's all?" ejaculates Mary Ann, who has the strong sense of the proprieties that befits a housekeeper in a "high family."

"Yes, that's all there is, but Susan thought that perhaps you could lend us something. Of course," rather loftily, "we shall return it."

"To be sure I can," cries Mary Ann, busy with her thoughts. "Now it's just lucky that Sir Bertram's coming home to-day and I've got something in the house. Now," enumerating, "there's a fine bit of salmon—a slice off it won't be noticed, and I could spare half of one of my ontrays and——"

"Oh, no," interposes Vanessa; "it must only be something that we can return."

After a good deal of discussion, in which Vanessa stoutly opposes Mary Ann's generous wishes, it is settled that she will take a slice of salmon, a *pate de foie gras*, a dish of strawberries, and nothing more.

"Now then, I'll get one of the men to carry the basket down to the vicarage, says Mrs. Marter. "He'll be there as soon as you."

But Vanessa insists on carrying the treasures home herself. She is a proud young lady who does not at all like the idea of borrowing provisions from the Hall, and she feels that were any of the servants to know of this little episode, she would be lowered forever in their eyes. So, in spite of all Mary Ann can say, Vanessa hangs the basket on her arm, and proceeds, half triumphant, half ashamed, on her way home. She feels as though every man, woman, or child whom she may meet will know that she is carrying off the squire's property, and even the knowledge that it is to be religiously restored to the uttermost farthing, except, of course, the strawberries, does not quite console her.

What, then, is her consternation when, half way down the drive, she perceives Sir Bertram's carriage rolling rapidly toward her! The instinct of Mother Eve to hide herself possesses her panic-stricken soul; but there is no place to give her shelter. Fain would she conceal the basket, but it is a great, big, unconcealable affair, and she wears only her close-fitting cotton frock. Her face crimson; she looks straight in front of her as the carriage dashes past, making no acknowledgment of the salutes of the men on the box, nor glancing at the inside of the brougham to give a bow of welcome to the returning squire.

It is the first time in her life that she has ever felt the emotion of shame, and now she wishes from her heart that they had rather set bread and cheese before the stranger than descended to the ignominy of borrowing his dinner.

When the carriage has passed she breathes again; the violent beating of her heart subsides. She is still hot with a heat that even the July sun is not responsible for; but she feels that the worst is over.

Is it? To whom, then, belongs the tall commanding form

just issuing from the lodge at the gates—to whom if not to the squire, Sir Bertram himself.

CHAPTER II.

HE is within fifty yards of her—she cannot turn aside or retrace her steps—no criminal detected in a heinous offense could feel more abjectly wretched and guilty than proud Vanessa. Sir Bertram, as he approaches, lifts his hat with stiff courtesy and stops to speak to her. Until this moment he has simply thought of her as the vicar's daughter; a country girl; the occasional playmate of his granddaughters, but, in the blushing, embarrassed girl before him, he for the first time recognizes a charming and beautiful woman. And Sir Bertram, though he despises women, has a great eye for beauty, and is always willing to look upon the sex as toys, more or less expensive. He has never before been at the pains to show Vanessa any courtesy or attention beyond the civil patronage of the squire to the vicar's daughter, and how thankfully would she to-day have dispensed with his politeness.

"That basket is too heavy for you," he says; "let me take it."

At any other time Vanessa would have been struck dumb by such condescension—now it only adds to her agony. She stands blushing and stammering but holding fast to her burden. Envious in her eyes would have seemed the Spartan boy who possessed a cloak wherewith to conceal his shame and his sufferings. But Sir Bertram, in his irresistible, autocratic way, lays his hand upon the basket and takes it from her. The most absent of men could scarcely fail to perceive Vanessa's confusion, and Sir Bertram has the eye of a lynx. He is pretty sure that her embarrassment is in some way connected with the basket. Is she carrying off some of his peaches? Doubtless—since the beginning of the world her sex have been fruit-stealers. One of the lodge-keeper's boys is within hail. Sir Bertram summons him by a gesture.

"Carry that to the vicarage *carefully*," he says, and the lad departs holding it with ostentatious care, as though it were a cup brimful of liquid.

Now that the possibility of the squire seeing its contents is removed, Vanessa breathes more freely, but there is something forced and unnatural in her manner which does not escape her companion.

"I have come from London to-day," he says, affably, turning to walk with her. "I saw your friends Mabel and Edith last night."

"Are they quite well? I suppose they are enjoying the season very much," hazards Vanessa.

The boy is out of sight now, thank Heaven!

"As much as your sex always enjoy excitement and dissipation," replies Sir Bertram. He is surprised to find himself talking to her as though she were a woman of the world. "I have no doubt you," looking critically at her, "would think yourself in paradise if you could have a glimpse of town life."

Vanessa turns her beautiful eyes to him with quite a solemn look.

"I think I should," she says, and sighs. Has she not had dreams and cravings after pleasure and society and the good things of this world?

"Some day perhaps it may be your turn," remarks the squire, briskly.

She makes no answer to this impossible suggestion.

At every step he takes in her company Sir Bertram finds himself more impressed by her grace and beauty.

"I hope," he says, with an approach to geniality of which Vanessa had never conceived him capable—"I hope that my being at the Hall will not frighten you away from it. Pray come up to the gardens or the house as you are accustomed to do in my absence."

"Thank you," murmurs Vanessa, her confusion returning as she wonders whether, if he knew about the contents of the basket, he would be as polite and condescending.

"I shall wish you good-bye here," he says, pausing as they come in sight of the Vicarage gate, and he stops and holds out his hand to her.

A sudden instinct comes over Vanessa that she must tell him the reason of her errand to the Hall—it comes over her with an overmastering power, fighting against shame and timidity—it is the revolt of an upright nature against deceit.

Seeing her turn from white to red, and back to white again, trembling, tears coming to her eyes, Sir Bertram's curiosity is aroused.

"Sir Bertram," she utters, and every word is wrung from her with a pang, "I must tell you. I hope you will not be offended. I hope you will not think me very mean—my father does not know anything about it—and——" Here her embarrassment is painful to witness, and Sir Bertram, hard as he is, is moved by the sight of beauty in distress.

"Pray do not agitate yourself," he says, in quite a kind voice. "Why, what can you have to tell me?" And again his thoughts travel to his peaches. "I am quite sure," with an air of gallantry she is too wretched to remark, "that I shall not find fault with anything *you* may have done."

Vanessa has begun her self-inflicted ordeal—there is no going back now.

"An old friend of papa's came unexpectedly to see us to-day," she relates in gasps. "Papa asked him to stay the night, and—and—we had scarcely anything for his dinner, and Susan and I thought (papa knows *nothing* about it) that perhaps Mary Ann, Mrs. Marter, could help us, and I went to ask her to *lend* us something. It is to be returned," adds poor Vanessa, blushing a still deeper crimson.

Sir Bertram looks at her with an amused smile.

"But, my dear lady," he utters, with great courtesy and kindness too, "to whom should one apply when one is in a little difficulty but to a neighbor? I am too charmed that Marter was able to be of use to you—at least I hope she was."

"You are very kind," says Vanessa, fixing her eyes for a moment on his with a good feeling and confidence that he has never before inspired in her; "but it seemed to me afterward that it was rather a mean thing to do. Papa, I am sure, would not have approved of it—only that everything is to be returned, except," still goaded on by that terrible impulse of truthfulness, "the strawberries, and as ours are nearly over—"

"As yours are nearly over," continues Sir Bertram, smiling, "you must in future come and share mine."

Is it possible that this is the awful Sir Bertram, the object of her fear from childhood up?

"You are very kind," she stammers again.

When a man who is not accustomed to saying or doing kind and pleasant things finds himself launched on a new and strange course, he is generally so pleased with himself that he wishes to prolong the sensation.

"I shall look upon it as a proof of friendship if you will treat me in a neighborly manner, and come to me if I can serve you in any way."

Thus Sir Bertram, and then he takes her hand, doffs his hat, and leaves her.

Vanessa is not accustomed to adventures or sensations, and the last hour has given her more than she has had in her collected life before. She flies home at full speed, and going straight to the kitchen, where Susan is still busy (Hepzibah has disappeared), she flings herself into a chair, puts her arms on the table, and, to the dismay and consternation of her nurse, who has been rejoicing over the contents of the basket, bursts into a passion of sobs and tears.

Meantime Sir Bertram is walking up the drive to his house, ejaculating at intervals, "By George!" He is extremely perplexed in his mind. It is his theory, not entirely unsupported by evidence, that women are deceitful and untruthful; and he is exceedingly surprised to find one of the sex so actuated by instinctive honesty as voluntarily to betray herself.

"It is strange, too," he muses, "that I never remarked her beauty before. I do not think there is a handsomer woman in London."

And then an idea crosses his brain of so astounding a nature that he stands stock still, whilst the blood runs a shade faster through his veins, and his even pulse beats a thought quicker. Certainly if Vanessa had not made her shameful revelation that idea would never have taken shape in Sir Bertram's brain. A beautiful woman—that was common enough—but a beautiful woman with a strong sense of honor! Why should not such an one become Lady Orford, and make him the envied of all men, and give him a direct heir to his fine property, thus cutting out the heir-presumptive, whom he hates as men can only hate the man who is to inherit all their good things? The thought has so intoxicating an effect upon him that he addresses the head gardener, who at this moment approaches him, with a geniality which that functionary has never before beheld in him, and which surprises him not a little.

"Well, Macfarlane, how are the gardens looking? A good show of flowers this year, eh? By the way, I want a man sent down to the Vicarage at once with some of your best grapes and peaches—your best," with emphasis, "and my compliments to the vicar."

This is the first time in Mr. Macfarlane's life that he has ever received such an order. Sir Bertram is not given to making presents to the vicar, as far as his experience goes.

"Yes, Sir Bertram," he replies. "Would you care to look round the houses this evening?"

"Not to-night—not to-night," answers Sir Bertram, and he walks away into the house and shuts himself in his study to pursue his strange and fascinating thoughts.

Sir Bertram is by no means indifferent to women, nor does he shun their society: He despises them, but he is none the less in the habit of making playthings of them. The Sir Bertram who comes occasionally to the Hall, goes rigidly to church twice every Sunday when there, and never has a petticoat inside his doors except those of his daughter and granddaughters, is a very different man from the Sir Bertram of London, Paris, and Vienna, although no one can say of him that he parades his vices (eccentricities, as some people euphemistically call them) before the eyes of the world. There he is a man of fashion, with somewhat the manners of the old school; a clever, sarcastic, cynical man, of whom women are horribly afraid, though eager to profit by his proverbial liberality to the sex. It is a favorite axiom of his that a man must either be loved for what he is or what he has, and he thinks that the man who has enjoys the superior advantage. Once in his life, and only once, has he been loved truly and sincerely, and that was by his gentle wife. But he had wearied of her; he despised her, and could never forgive her for not having borne him an heir. Marriage had been so irksome to him that he refused to enter upon that estate again—women, so long as they were not sure of a man, and had to win his liberality by amusing and currying favor with him, were pretty certain to be well-behaved and not exacting. As for their love, he did not value it an atom: it rather lent piquancy to the situation that all the time they flattered themselves they were cajoling and deceiving him he saw through and laughed at them. Sir Bertram, you see, is not one of those nice old gentlemen who make age venerable and beloved. The term, however, "old gentleman" scarcely applies to him. He is sixty-one, hale, wiry, vigorous, and he does not look his age by three or four years.

His musings, which he pursues over his wine after dinner, becomes more and more agreeable to him—he, who so rarely resolves suddenly or acts on the spur of fancy, has almost settled that he will hold out the scepter to this humble Esther. He draws a picture to himself of the beautiful, blushing girl sitting opposite to him as Lady Orford, and the picture pleases him exceedingly. To-morrow morning he will dispatch a note asking the vicar and his daughter to dine. It does not occur to him for a moment that Esther may refuse to take advantage of the outstretched scepter, nor that indeed there can be any factor in the

affair but Sir Bertram Orford's will. Nor, to his idea, is there anything shocking in a marriage between May and December, any more than there is a scruple in the mind of an old Turk who acquires a new slave. A title, diamonds, fine clothes, and sumptuous living are to him an ample exchange for youth and beauty. Neither has he any fear of rivals after marriage. In his opinion no man is ever deceived or outwitted unless he willfully turns his back and shuts his eyes—a woman must have opportunity or what can she do? If a husband permits his wife to receive young men in her drawing-room when he is not present; to dance; to have an intimate friend of her own sex whose house is always open to her; he is a fool who courts dishonor and deserves contempt.

Lady Orford would have none of these opportunities. A sensible man does not leave his wife to her own devices any more than he leaves diamonds or his check-book to the mercy of strangers and possible thieves.

Since, for the last sixteen years, women, even young and handsome ones, have angled for Sir Bertram, it is perhaps not surprising that he expects to find a young country girl, with no prospects, ready to mount to a seventh heaven of ecstasy at being invited to share his throne.

I left my beautiful Vanessa showering tears thick and fast between her fingers on the kitchen-table, little thinking how her shame has turned to her glory in the squire's eyes, and only conscious of a sense of agonizing, overwhelming disgrace. Being possessed of sufficient temper to vindicate her earthliness, she makes unhappy Susan the victim of her wrath and misery.

"Why did you persuade me to do anything so mean?" she sobs. "It is all your fault. I never felt so miserable in my life—I can never look him in the face again."

At this point her sobs redouble and her whole frame is convulsed.

"Why, deary me!" cries Susan, aghast, "whatever has happened? Why, Miss Nessa, my dear, don't take on like that!"

And she looks despairingly from Vanessa to her culinary operations, which will not admit of being left, whilst she soothes her nursling.

"Of course," pants Vanessa, "it was mean and horrid to go and ask for the squire's things—it was like stealing. And then to meet him and be found out and have to confess."

From her redoubled grief at this point it is evident that the most poignant reflection is the last-mentioned one.

Poor Susan turns pale even through the flush with which the kitchen fire has illumined her cheeks.

"Why, lor', my dear, what *do* you mean?" and she positively trembles, for every one stands in awe of the squire.

"I was carrying the basket and I met him, and he took it from me," gasps Vanessa.

Susan is fain to catch hold of the table for support. It is not only her concern for her young lady's distress, but an awful thought seizes her that this masterpiece of sagacity on her part on which she had been pluming herself may have cost her sister

her situation. Sir Bertram is a very hard man, as everybody knows.

"Why," she falters, "he never went for to open it, did he?"

"No," answers Vanessa; "but it was all the same—I had to tell him."

"Whatever will become of Mary Ann!" ejaculated Susan, despairingly. Then she too feels the want of a victim, and adds, irascibly, "I don't know what possessed your pa, I'm sure, to ask the gentleman to stop without finding out first whether there was anything to give him to eat."

Vanessa has not until this moment thought of Mary Ann's share in the transaction. Susan's words so terrify her that she leaves off sobbing and looks up aghast with her lovely, half-drowned eyes.

"Did the squire seem *very* angry?" asks Susan, faintly.

"No," answers Vanessa; "he was quite kind—I never thought he could be so kind. He said what was the use of neighbors if they couldn't help each other in a difficulty."

"Lor' a mussy me!" utters Susan, with a petrified air. "Why, my dear, are you sure you understood him right?"

"Of course I am," responds Vanessa, pettishly. "But that does not make it any the less mean or horrid to have done it."

Susan, however, takes a different view of the situation, and goes about preparing the dinner with renewed ardor.

"Come, deary," she says, presently, seeing that Vanessa remains in her despondent attitude—"go and bathe your eyes and put on your musling frock, so as to be ready for dinner."

"I am not going to dine," replies the young lady, with great decision. "Do you think I would touch any of his nasty horrid things after the misery I've suffered about them?"

"Why, my dear, 'twill look so odd if you don't. Come, there's a lady, go and get yourself ready."

Vanessa shakes her head.

"No," she persists. "Besides, they won't want me. They will have plenty to talk about, and I might be in the way."

"Well," observes Susan, "I should have thought, never meeting a gentleman from one year's end to the other, you'd have been pleased to see one and hear him talk."

"What's the use of gentlemen to me?" utters Vanessa, with unaccustomed pettishness, and she pushes back her chair, and, rising, marches out of the room.

It is with considerable chagrin that Mr. Brandon, on being ushered by his host into the dining-room, finds only two covers laid. All the time that he has been talking to the vicar his eyes have furtively been seeking the flutter of a skirt in the distance, and, though the conversation has been interesting enough, he has been somewhat anxious for the dinner-hour, when he should see and speak to that shy, beautiful creature again.

"I hope I have not driven Miss Wentworth away," he says to the vicar, with an intonation of disappointment that shrewd Susan's ears do not fail to catch. For Susan, mistrustful of Hepzibah, has elected to wait at dinner, thinking only of her master's honor and glory, and nothing of her own dignity.

"Where is my daughter?" asks Mr. Wentworth, looking inquiringly at Susan.

"Miss Wentworth is rather feeling the heat, sir," replies that excellent woman, mendaciously. "She asks to be excused from dining to-night."

If Susan has taken immense pains over this banquet, she is amply repaid by the justice that host and guest do to it; by the look of pleased surprise in the vicar's eyes as the various delicacies are put before them, and the compliments which Mr. Brandon pays to the excellence of country fare. Susan, by the end of dinner, has fallen in love with the stranger—he is quite the gentleman, fine, handsome, upstanding, pleasant, friendly—she finds a whole string of epithets for him, and is enthusiastic in praise of him to Vanessa, whose appetite, having got the better of her temper, had brought her down to the kitchen, where, in spite of Susan's remonstrances, she insists in dining off such of the comestibles as are strictly Vicarage property. She is thus engaged when a tap comes at the door and one of the gardeners from the Hall appears with the squire's offerings and his polite message.

As Susan says, with more emphasis than originality, you might have knocked her down with a feather. She goes hastily out, shutting the door behind her, to exclude from profane gaze the voluntary Cinderella, and to draw a glass of beer for the squire's messenger.

When she returns and takes the contents from the basket, she is more wonder-stricken than ever. A couple of bunches of grapes which she declares remind her of the picture in Scripture history of the Children of Israel coming out of Canaan with their samples of its fertility (aforesaid picture representing two stalwart men bearing on a pole between them a bunch of grapes, each of which is as big as a turkey's egg), and a dozen of the largest, loveliest peaches, which make Vanessa's eyes glisten.

"Well!!!" utters Susan, heaving a long sigh, the expression of half a dozen different emotions. —Then after a prolonged gaze at her nursling, she remarks, "I shouldn't wonder if the squire hasn't gone and fallen in love with you!"

At which Vanessa bursts into a peal of laughter that makes its way into the dining-room and distracts and tantalizes John Brandon horribly.

CHAPTER III.

A GLORIOUS sunset floods the latticed panes of the bay-windowed dining-room—the vicar and his guest are still sitting over their wine and the magnificent dessert; the former has not been so pleased or excited this many a year, and the latter, having spent all the season in London, finds the country a paradise, incomplete, however, at this moment without its Eve, whom he suspects to be lurking in the garden. Yes, in the distance, behind yonder tree, he is certain that is the flutter of a white skirt. He is dying to propose, an adjournment to the garden, but his host seems so happy sipping his port and leisurely enjoying his grapes,

that John Brandon, who is the best-natured man in the world has not the heart to disturb him. Fortune, however, which is always doing one person a good turn at the expense of another, favors him. The capricious goddess takes the form of the excellent and homely Susan.

"I am sorry to disturb you, sir," she says, in a low voice to her master, "but they don't think Widow Jones can last the night, and she keeps on asking for you."

In an instant the vicar has risen from his chair.

"I will go at once," he answers. Then, turning to Brandon, he adds, "I know that in so solemn a case you——"

"Of course, of course," assents the other heartily.

"Ask my daughter to come down at once," utters the vicar, hurriedly; but Brandon, rising, says:

"I see Miss Wentworth in the garden, and will join her there."

As he walks across the lawn through the balmy, flower-scented air, a sense of pleasure steals through his veins. The heavens are still aglow with the glory of the vanished sun—a great, perfect peace is on everything; for a moment it crosses his mind to wonder how men can prefer the din and tumult, the loaded air, the feverish unrest of life in cities to the delicious calm, the reposeful happiness of the country. He has not time to remember that it is not always summer even here, and that one is not always hastening to join a lovely young woman who inspires an ardent interest in one's breast.

He comes upon Vanessa standing midway down the path looking at the gorgeous sunset. She has not heard his footsteps on the grass, and starts as he comes up to her. He first answers the questioning look in her eyes, which says, "Where is my father?" and then adds on his own account:

"Why did you deprive us of the pleasure of your society at dinner?"

He speaks with the peculiar modulation of voice that men use toward a woman whom they either love already or feel themselves capable of loving; and Vanessa, who all these years has been dreaming of lovers and heroes and knights, recognizes the intonation at once with a little thrill of pleasure. Perhaps John Brandon is not much like a hero, but he is a decidedly well-looking gentleman, and—he is the first man who has ever stood to Vanessa in the position of a possible lover. His words, and, more than his words, the tone of them, bring a smile to her lips and a light to those lovely eyes which at this moment are aflame from the red glow in the heavens.

"I thought," she says, developing in a moment the instinct of coquetry inborn in her sex—"I thought I might be in the way. You and papa would have so much to talk about." Then, with a look direct into his eyes, which are level with hers, and with a half-restrained eagerness in her voice which is immensely flattering to him, she utters, "It is not *really* true that papa and you were at college together? You *cannot* be as old as he is!"

For the first time in his life it occurs to John Brandon to re

gret his age, and to wish that he could take ten, nay, fifteen years off it.

"I am afraid," he answers, smiling, "that there is but a few months' difference, a year at most, between your father and myself." Then returning to his caressing inflection of voice. "Will you, after that confession, banish me to the limbo of foggydom, and cease to feel the slightest interest in me?"

"Oh, no," answers Vanessa, with one of her beautiful smiles, thinking to herself meanwhile that, though he is really so unfortunately old in years, still in heart, even in looks, he is quite young enough for—for anything.

"Forty-three," resumes Brandon, in a melancholy tone. "And the worst of it," with a smile hovering about his lips—"the worst of it is that I do not feel old; indeed, until this moment I don't believe I ever realized the dreadful fact of my age."

"Oh," says Vanessa, looking quite pained and embarrassed, for she is exceedingly sensitive and sympathetic, and would consider it a crime rather than a blunder to wound any one's feelings. "I am so very sorry. I did not mean—I——"

"You flattered me," returns Brandon, gallantly, "by what you said. What greater compliment could you pay to me than by refusing to believe my age? And I am quite young enough," dropping his voice, "not to be proof against beauty and charm."

He is not altogether pleased with himself when he has said this. He feels a burning desire to make love to the beautiful creature at his side, and yet he is distinctly conscious that he ought not to treat her as he would one of the many young girls he meets in society who are open to a flirtation at a moment's notice. Therefore not pausing to let his last words make their point, he hurries on, changing his voice to a matter-of-fact tone.

"And so, your father tells me, you have lived all your life here in this quiet country spot."

"Yes," answer Vanessa, sensibly disappointed at his change of tone; "I have never been away from it."

"Now, do you know," pursues Brandon, "it is almost impossible for me to realize the position. Some one who has lived in Arcadia all her life; has never seen the city, nor been to a play, nor witnessed a spectacle of any kind whatever, nor even seen a thousand persons collected together."

"Ah!" interposes Vanessa, eagerly, "but I know it all just as well as if I had seen it. I have read about it in books, and then Edith and Mabel described everything to me."

"Edith and Mabel?" inquiringly.

"Sir Bertram's granddaughters."

"Now," smiles Brandon, "I shall have to ask who Sir Bertram is?"

"He is the squire—Sir Bertram Orford—he lives at the Hall," and Vanessa indicates the direction of Sir Bertram's seat by a gesture of her head.

"Oh! is he your squire? I have met him—I know him

slightly." Then, feeling a shade of disappointment as he thinks of shooting-parties and a troop of probable young gallants come down from the Hall to adore and make love to the vicar's daughter. "After all, then, if you do not go to town, town is brought to you, and you have, I suppose, no end of gayeties and festivities in the shooting season."

Vanessa answers him by a little laugh that shows her pearls of teeth to perfection.

"Gayeties and festivities!" she echoes, and laughs again.

"But surely Sir Bertram has shooting-parties?"

"Never," answers Vanessa. "He does not shoot himself, because once, a great many years ago, he shot a friend's eye out, and he never touched a gun afterward. Not a creature ever comes within his gate except his daughter, Mrs. Vaughan, and her daughters, Edith and Mabel?"

"Really!" utters Brandon, somewhat perplexed, as he remembers Sir Bertram's reputation as a host and entertainer at his villa on the Thames.

"If you were to see him," pursues Vanessa, "you would quite understand it. He cannot bear the sight of women—or girls. We always have to fly if we see him coming."

"Really!" utters Brandon again, in a tone still more indicative of surprise. Report tells a very different tale of Sir Bertram from Vanessa's.

"I am forgetting, though," she continues, "you said you knew him."

"Only slightly," returns Brandon. "I have met him once or twice at the houses of mutual friends in town."

"He is a horrid, disagreeable, stiff, pompous old man," says Vanessa, candidly. "We hate him."

"Does we include his granddaughters?"

"Oh, they hate him much more than I do. "Then," naively, "they see so much more of him."

The after-glow has passed into twilight, and now the moon is rising and making lovely lights and shadows in the Vicarage garden.

"Let us sit here," says Brandon, pointing to a rustic bench, and Vanessa complies. This is certainly the pleasantest evening she has ever spent—the novelty of the situation increases the delight of it; after all her dreams, she is really sitting here with a man beside her—a man who tells her plainly with his eyes, in a language which she understands by intuition, that he derives the keenest pleasure from her presence, and that he finds her fair.

"So, then," he says, regarding her with an expression of deepest interest, "you are only half Arcadian. You know all about the world and its doings, though only by hearsay."

"Yes," she answers, with a touch of conscious pride, "Edith and Mabel tell me everything."

Brandon smiles, wondering to himself how much that everything comprises.

"Now," he says, "would you not like to see all these gay

doings with your own eyes? Would you not like to take part in them yourself?"

"Ah!" utters Vanessa, with a long-drawn sigh. She does not even know herself how much that sigh expresses.

"Suppose," says Brandon, his eyes kindling a little as certain rapturous thoughts strike him—"suppose I were to persuade your father to bring you up to stay with me in town?"

"Oh!" and Vanessa looks full in his eyes with some such an expression as a slave might wear whose master offered her freedom.

"She is a woman all over," thinks Brandon. He makes the reflection in no spirit of detraction, for he is of those who think the so-called weaknesses of women their greatest charm. Most brave, honest, manly men do. A woman who did not want to be loved and admired, who did not long eagerly for pleasure, would have been only half a woman in his eyes.

"Would you like it?" he asks, and again his voice fails to that tender intonation.

Would she like it? Her face tells him that, but her voice is choked by the beating of her heart. Then suddenly the light dies away from her eyes, and she utters mournfully:

"He would not be persuaded—I know—he would not."

"We shall see," says Brandon, confidently enough. "Here he comes. I will not broach it to-night, because, after his sad errand, perhaps——"

And here the vicar joins them.

Susan, as she brushes her nursing's locks that night, is all eagerness to hear about "the gentleman." With the inherent passion of her sex for match-making, she already sees in him a suitor, a possible husband for her young lady.

"Did you find out if he was married, my deary?" is almost her first question.

"Why, of course he is not," returns Vanessa, superbly, who, from her inner sense of the fitness of things rather than from her own knowledge of the world (as derived from Edith and Mabel), is perfectly certain that no married man looks at women other than his wife with such eyes nor talks to them in such a voice as Brandon has used.

"No," says Susan. "He hasn't got the look nor yet the ways of a married gentleman."

For, in Susan's day, bonds set less lightly on wedded folk than to-day.

"He seems a very nice gentleman," tentatively.

"Yes," answers Vanessa, half lost in reverie. "Susan!" starting up suddenly and forgetting that her nurse has hold of her by the hair until painfully reminded of the fact, "what *do* you think?"

"Lor', my dear," cries Susan, "whatever do you start up on a sudden like that for? Why, you've made me tear out a hand-full!"

"Never mind," returns Vanessa, indifferent to pain in her excitement; "he said," her face all aglow, "he said he would try to get papa to take me to London to stay with him. Oh! Susan!"

marching up and down the room, "I shall die of pleasure if I go, and," suddenly flinging herself on the bed, "I shall die of disappointment if I don't."

"Well I never!" cries Susan, wrought by sympathy to an almost equal pitch of excitement. "But there," with the triumph of successful prophecy, "I always said it. Mary Ann knows it—she can prove my words—I always said 'The first gentlemen as ever claps eyes on Miss Nessa,' I says, says I, 'he'll be carrying of her off.' Ask Mary Ann if them was not my very words."

"Susan," interrupts Vanessa, sitting upright on the bed, laughing but radiant with pleasure, "don't be an old goose!"

"I see it all," continues Susan, the mantle of prophecy still draping her; "you'll go, and then you'll marry him and be one of the grandest and handsomest ladies in London. You'll go to Court, and you'll take the shine off the squire's granddaughters and a good many more of 'em. I'm sure's he's a great gentleman—he looks it even though he is plain Mister, but it isn't always the titled folk as is the best families."

If Vanessa affects to chide her nurse, she is not the less pleased, not to say dazzled, by her predictions.

Sir Bertram, who at this moment is coldly drawing out the details of her future life (should he see fit to put into execution the idea that has stricken his imagination), would be very much surprised and disgusted if he could be aware that the very day which has given him this inspiration about extending the scepter to her has also, by a strange coincidence, brought a rival into the field—a rival who has succeeded, too, in taking what in Sir Bertram's eyes is of no account, the *fancy* of the young lady. Fancy! "The bow-string and sack for women with fancies," the old Turk would have ordained could he have had his cruel will. Indeed, from his ideas about women, there is no doubt Sir Bertram ought to have been a disciple of Mohammed.

Susan is gone, and Vanessa stands on the open casement, lovely, love-desiring as Juliet. She stands there in the hush of night, looking with rapt eyes at the fair sky, weaving dreams of the future, the future that seems like some enchanted land to the eyes of her soul. What does it hold for her! love? rapture? Yes, of these she feels joyously confident. To see the world—to taste its pleasures—to love and be beloved—this is the exquisite mirage the blue vault of heaven offers to her dazzled eyes.

And these ideas, cries some skeptical reader, come hot-pressed to the mind of a country girl who for the first time in her life talks to a man and sees that he admires her. Need they be new ideas? Do you think that because a woman does not come in contact with men the desire for love never burns in her heart? Do you think the dreamy young girl who loves solitary rambles and gazes by night at the stars has no aspirations, no yearnings after some other, fuller life, vague though her thoughts of it may be? Do you think that when spring and sunshine come, waking all nature to quicker life, the hearts which Fate has left to solitude do not cry aloud for their share of joy and love, do not agonizingly rebel against their forlorn and barren doom? So

has Vanessa desired and rebelled, but to-night heaven seems to have opened for her, and the future is one vast garden of sunshine and promise.

She stands at the window, her glorious hair making a gold mantle over her white dress; unconscious as Juliet of a lover lurking in the garden. Brandon, not accustomed to early hours, has asked permission of his host to stroll another half hour in the air with his cigar, promising to look to the bolts and bars on his return.

"We do not trouble about those," the vicar has told him smiling—"we have no thieves here, and no treasure to steal."

Brandon has finished one cigar, and finding the night so exquisite, can yet not make up his mind to leave it, when, in the distance, he sees Vanessa's figure at the window. Stealthily he creeps from tree to tree, until he is beneath the shadow of one near enough to let him see distinctly her upturned face. Could any man with a spark of poetry in him behold a beautiful woman standing by moonlight at a window and not think of Juliet?

She cannot see him, and he leans against the tree's trunk and looks his fill.

"Ah, my poor fellow!" he says, presently, apostrophizing himself between smiling and sighing, "at forty-three one is past playing the part of Romeo—not because one is past feeling it, Heaven knows, but because it becomes ridiculous. An elderly Romeo! Twenty years ago I could have done it well. I should like to do it now, but what an old fool she would think me! After all, though," turning his eyes away for a moment from the picture of Juliet and looking far away as one does when deep in thought, "does a man love better at twenty-three than forty-three? His blood is hotter: that would make him a better lover; but I think forty-three loves longer and deeper, and so might make the better husband. Yes, Romeo must be young, but——"

Brandon turns his eyes wistfully back to Juliet, and leaves his sentence unfinished. He has been going about the world for five-and-twenty years—he knows as much of it as priest, doctor, and lawyer all in one, but he has a simple, honest, straightforward nature, and in spite of all he has heard, read, and experienced, believes in God, and does not despise women. He is unmarried, not from contempt and hatred of that state, but because he was rejected by the only woman he had ever, up to this moment, desired to marry. Twenty years ago, when he would have fain played Romeo to her Juliet, she was, he remembers at this moment, something in the style of Vanessa, but not near, *not near* so lovely—she is a large and portly dame now, who presented a daughter this season. Truly men have the best of it in this world; they may have a Juliet when they are twenty-three, thirty-three, forty-three, and so on even up to seventy-three.

The moon still shines on half the latticed casement—the other half remains open, but Juliet is no longer there. Brandon has strolled away to the further end of the garden, has lighted another cigar, and is sitting deep in thought on that same bench

where, three hours since, Vanessa sat beside him. Even if it were possible, he is saying to himself, to win her love, it would be most unfair to attempt it until she has seen something of the world, has mixed with other men (men against whom John Brandon, in his honest, diffident heart, thinks he would not have the smallest chance). She is young and imaginative, thirsting for pleasure—it is quite probable that here, in the country's heart, without a single rival, she might listen to his wooing and grow to think she loved him. And if he could keep her shut up here, she might never know what gallant young Romeos were wandering up and down the world in perpetual search of Juliets; but Brandon has none of Sir Bertram's Oriental ideas—indeed, if you wanted to find two men who offered the most thorough contrast to each other, you could not have succeeded better than in choosing the two who to-day became aspirants in their hearts to Vanessa's hand.

Brandon breaks off his reverie, determined to seek no unfair advantage, and bent on inducing the vicar to bring his daughter to London.

At breakfast next morning he gayly and boldly broaches the subject.

"Wentworth," he says, in his cheery voice, "now that I have enjoyed your hospitality, you must come and taste mine. Miss Wentworth and I have hatched a little conspiracy to carry you off to London, and only think, my dear fellow, what an opportunity for you to go to the British Museum, and get valuable references for the great work!"

Brandon sees the hand of the presiding genius, stretched at this moment toward the sugar basin, tremble; sees the faint color flit through her cheek, and her eyes dart an eager look at her father.

"What!" says the vicar, half smiling, half perplexed. "Why, my dear Brandon, you are joking!"

"We shall settle it all for you," answers Brandon, gayly—"you shall have no trouble. I will leave you a whole week to turn it over in your mind, and then I shall come back for your answer."

Half an hour later he is bidding host and hostess farewell at their gate, as he has to be in London that night. He gazes for a moment into Vanessa's eyes as he bends from his saddle to take her hand once more, and there is a fire in his eyes that makes them tell even more tales than they told last night—tales eminently pleasing to the fair maid who reads.

She has betaken herself to that bower in the garden where first he saw her, and thither, a few moments later, comes the vicar, hurrying. He is unusually excited; an open letter is in his hands.

"Read this, my dear," he says, and Vanessa with some wonder takes it from him and obeys

"DEAR, WENTWORTH" (she reads),—"Will you and your daughter give me the pleasure of your company at dinner

to-night at eight o'clock precisely? I am here alone. The brougham shall bring you and take you home.

"Yours very truly,

"BERTRAM ORFORD."

CHAPTER IV.

FATHER and daughter exchange glances—there is, indeed, a look almost of consternation upon both their faces—too much honor is sometimes overwhelming to those upon whom it is thrust suddenly.

Vanessa has been to the Hall now and then to dine with the squire's granddaughter in the middle of the day, on which occasions his august majesty has never deigned to be present; and, now and again, the vicar had been invited to dine during Mrs. Vaughan's stay. There had been no sending of carriages, however, to fetch either of them: thus this sudden condescension is felt by both to be not only startling but embarrassing.

"I suppose we must go," says the vicar, looking doubtfully at his daughter.

"But I have nothing to wear," exclaims Vanessa, her feminine instinct triumphing at once over every other thought.

"Sir Bertram will not expect any very great display of dress, I dare say," answers the vicar, in a nervous, flurried manner, "and we must not run the risk of offending him since he is so kind. I will go and write an acceptance."

Vanessa is quite excited. A new era seems to have commenced in her life. She has retired to this bower to dream about Brandon; to recall his looks and words; to feast on the thought that a being from the outer world has seen her—a being who lives habitually in the sight of beautiful and well-born women, and has yet not despised her; to dwell with rapture on the thought of going to visit the great city; but this command to dine at the Hall drives everything else out of her head for the moment, and she hastens to seek Susan and to consult with her upon her toilet for the evening.

Susan is in a jubilant and triumphant frame of mind; she is no longer surprised at anything—she indulges in an innocent kind of self-glorification at her own sagacity, and reiterates at intervals with ever-increasing emphasis that she knew how it would be all along. She even goes so far as to consider herself the humble instrument of this honor, for she says:

"If I hadn't thought of getting you to go up to Mary Ann, why, you wouldn't have met the squire, and, if you hadn't have met the squire, he couldn't have been so took with you."

But this allusion to her shame and suffering of yesterday is unpalatable to Vanessa, and she hastens to change the subject.

A more beautiful creature than the girl who, in her simple muslin dress, with the knot of white roses in her hair, enters the Hall drawing-room that evening would be hard to find. She trembles and feels agonizingly shy, but it is with the graceful shyness of modesty, not the shyness of awkwardness. Sir Bertram recognises and approves it; *personages*, I am told, are

gratified by seeing that they inspire awe, and are far more prepossessed by timidity in subjects than undue confidence. Here, at all events, Sir Bertram is autocrat and king of the castle. It pleases him to live in semi-state at the Hall; therefore, though he almost invariably dines alone, the appointments of the table are as imposing as though he were entertaining a party—the silver stands in array on the sideboard, rare flowers ornament the table, the finest fruits the hot-houses produce are served for their master.

This morning Sir Bertram has requested Mrs. Marter to be particularly choice in her *menu*, and to direct her attention especially to the sweets.

“Young ladies,” he observed, and his features actually relaxed into a smile, “think most of that part of dinner.”

At this, Mrs. Marter, making mention of the interview later to her sister, described herself as being reduced to that state of moral and physical weakness when a feather would have been sufficient to prostrate her. But she, who was as quick at seeing through a milestone as Susan, drew her own auguries at once.

Vanessa experienced a kind of enchantment of the senses as she sat at dinner, surrounded by beautiful and luxurious objects; flowers such as she had never seen before massed together in profusion, and wafting new and delicious perfumes toward her. From the broad windows stretched the wide and lovely view—the sky was one golden glory. The squire had insisted on her tasting his champagne, and even the few dainty sips she had indulged in had sent a pleasant exhilaration through her veins: made her eyes sparkle, and dispersed her first shyness. Was it a dream or a reality? The squire, monster and ogre of all her previous thoughts, transformed into a genial, courteous host; talking to her without a trace of condescension or patronage in his manner, and exerting himself to amuse and interest her!

The vicar, most absent of men, accustomed to eat in unbroken silence, was lost in abstruse reflections, and the squire was therefore at liberty, without discourtesy to the father, to confine his attentions to the daughter. And, without Vanessa being aware of it, he was watching her narrowly; observing her every action, scanning her every feature, weighing her graces and beauties in his cynical mind, and, strange to say, not finding her wanting. To say that he was falling in love with her would be inappropriate—so soft an emotion had no part in Sir Bertram's nature; such sense as he had she stirred; the possession of her beauty would be flattering to his pride; she had all the elements of a charming and lovely woman whom wealth and rank would set as silver sets diamonds, bringing stray stones together into a superb ornament. Whilst they yet sat at dinner he resolved that Venessa should be Lady Orford.

That young damsel, as he held the door open for her when she repaired to the drawing-room, was not without some intuition of the impression she had produced on the squire, and a sense of power made a certain triumph tingle in her veins such as the first taste of it gives to those who love and are born to wield it.

And Vanessa, though circumstances had placed her in so lowly and isolated a position, had the instincts ascribed to a young empress. She threw herself into a low chair near the window, and looked out over the terrace and across the park. She would have liked to fly to the housekeeper's room and pour her wonder, surprise, and admiration into the sympathizing ears of Mary Ann, but something told her that a gulf divided her from yesterday: that now she was Sir Bertram's guest she could not be Mary Ann's—at all events, whilst the squire was at home.

And now, leaning back in the luxurious chair, her face fanned by the soft west wind, her eyes fixed on the last paling cloud that erewhile was so vivid a red, her thoughts turn again to Brandon. If he were but the squire! If? Why not *if* earth were paradise at once! What pleasure would run through John Brandon's veins if he knew how Vanessa was thinking of him! But later he would have reflected, "I am the only man she has seen—she wants to love—it is the emotion that charms her—therefore the first man she meets with the smallest pretension to pleasing a woman would succeed in fixing her fancy. But how about afterward when she sees other men?" That is what John Brandon would have said: what later on he did say to himself, and his estimation of the situation was perfectly correct.

Vanessa is not left long to reverie—the hard, thin voice of the squire, modulated by considerable effort, breaks on her ear.

"Deep in thought!" it says. "I wonder if one might venture to ask the nature of your reflections?"

Since it would be impossible for her to reply, "I was wishing that you were Mr. Brandon," we may forgive her for not adhering to the truth on this occasion.

"I was thinking," she answers, "how lovely this view is, and how nice it must be to live up so high instead of down below."

"Do you think you would like to live here?" says Sir Bertram, in so meaning a tone that Vanessa's cheeks and throat are flooded with crimson in a moment. To hide her embarrassment she almost turns her back to her host and exclaims, with unnecessary eagerness:

"There is the moon coming up behind the trees. How lovely!"

"Shall we take a turn in the garden?" asks Sir Bertram. "Your father has found some wonderful book in the library, and is lost to everything else."

Vanessa expresses her willingness, and the squire proceeds to ring the bell.

"I am going to send for your hat and shawl," he says, but she tells him that she has not even brought any. He, however, not being animated by the recklessness of young folk, but *having*, instead, a rooted mistrust of the climate of his country, puts on his hat, hangs a light coat over his arm, and, thus prepared, steps out on the terrace where Vanessa is waiting for him.

Sir Bertram has no intention of frightening his quarry by too hasty a pursuit, but as he is quite determined to possess her, goes to work slowly, and, as he thinks, surely. He intends to

appeal to those feelings and senses in her which in his opinion are the strongest motive-power in her sex—vanity, ambition, love of luxury and display. When she is fully alive to how much there will be to gain by being Lady Orford, he has no doubt of his suit being successful. He has always employed the same tactics with women, treating them with a calculating lavishness and generosity, and to this he has owed the apparent success with them which has surprised and not unfrequently disgusted men with far more pretensions in themselves to please the fair. He is coldly aware that any symptom of love or passion in a man of his age must be necessarily repellent and disgusting to a young girl, and he has quite sufficient self-command, impressed though he is by her beauty, to assume nothing warmer than a paternal and kindly manner which shall gradually win her confidence without alarming or shocking her. He is quite content to bide his time. It is all very well for youth to snatch at what it covets, but elders may trip or stumble, and must walk quietly up to the object of their pursuit.

Vanessa's feelings this evening, though of an entirely different nature from those of yesterday, are decidedly agreeable. Her pride and vanity are extremely gratified by the attentions of the greatest personage whom she has ever seen or known. For the awe and respect in which Sir Bertram is held in his own domain exceeds that which is offered to many a potentate by his subjects. Has not she herself trembled before him? And here, to-night, she is walking fearlessly beside him—a favored guest—one whom he is unmistakably pleased to honor. What woman would believe me if I said that Vanessa failed to connect this strange and sudden change with her own beauty; failed to guess that the squire, in condescending almost for the first time to take any particular notice of her, had found that she was fair? She had her looking-glass, besides the constant eulogies and gloryifyings of Mary Ann and Susan to tell her so much—all she wanted was the opportunity of comparing herself with other women to know what the degree of her beauty was.

Vanessa has no desire to “blush unseen;” she wants to be admired, and more, much more, to be loved. Certainly she has no ambition to be loved by the squire; but she likes immensely to be treated with distinction by him, and thus to win increased respect and consideration from others. Sir Bertram talks pleasantly to her; tells her much about the world, especially those vanities and trivialities of it which he knows to be so pleasing to the female ear, and, before they return to the house, he has made a proposal to Vanessa which causes her eyes to glisten and her red lips to part with an exclamation of delight. How would she like to drive over to B—, that seaport town which she once before visited in company with Edith and Mabel? The squire, it is to be supposed, is like the rest of the world, a little sensitive on some points—he does not speak of these young ladies to Vanessa as his granddaughters. The weather promises to hold fine if it pleases her, he will send on horses to-morrow, and, on the following day, they will start at half-past

ten and drive over. He is confident the vicar will not make any objection.

I cannot expect any reader who leads at all a gay and fashionable life, nor even one with whom excursions and parties of pleasure are occasional incidents, to imagine how delightful this proposition was to Vanessa, who lived year in, year out, with nothing to break the monotony of her life. Sir Bertram was charmed to see her delight and excitement at the proposal; if she was so eager for pleasure, he had a very excellent chance of success by ministering to her appetite. He had one very shrewd conviction, however, and that was that he must keep other men, younger men, away from her until she was Lady Orford. After that he charged himself, in perfect confidence, with the care of his honor.

Vanessa went home full of triumph and excitement, entirely shared by the faithful Susan. When she fell asleep she dreamed that she was up at the Hall again, but the squire had turned into Mr. Brandon. She could almost have cried for disappointment when she awoke to find it was only a dream—it had been so transcendently delightful.

Saturday came and brought lovely weather. Punctual to a moment the squire's barouche, with its fine black horses, rolled up to the Vicarage door, and Vanessa and her father mounted into it; she obeying Sir Bertram's gesture and taking the seat of honor beside him, although she would fain, from a sense of duty, have relinquished it to her father. The radiance of happiness added fourfold to her beauty; she had a delicious sense of importance as she drove through the village and saw the wondering stares of the courtesying and bobbing folk. The swift motion through the air and the swing of the luxurious carriage were new and agreeable sensations: the fine liveries of the servants and the footman's powdered head pleased her eyes and gratified her pride. Sir Bertram, watching her quietly, read her like a book, and thought what an easy bird a pretty woman is to catch. Then, you see, he knew nothing about John Brandon; nor did he further know that Vanessa was one of those women who, though they delight in pleasure, excitement, and the vanities of life, would no more be induced to marry a man they did not love than to sell themselves to the powers of darkness. If such women can feel the intensity of love, they suffer in an even greater degree the intensity of repulsion, and would almost rather endure death than submit to an embrace from a man they do not love.

If Vanessa, as is quite probable, had her little suspicions that the squire's amazing kindness was not entirely disinterested, she had no more idea of encouraging his suit than if he had been her own grandfather instead of Edith's and Mabel's; but that was no reason why she should not enjoy the favors which, just at present, he seemed inclined to shower upon her.

It was nearly one o'clock when they drew up with a clatter at the door of the principal hotel, where the landlord, apprised of their intended visit, stood on the steps to receive them with becoming honor. As she descended from the carriage, there

flashed upon Vanessa like lightning the memory of an incident which occurred on the only occasion when she had ever been in B—. She had driven over with Edith, Mabel, and their maid some three years ago in the wagonette, and as they reached the door a gentleman was standing on the steps smoking a cigar, which, as the young ladies advanced, he removed from his mouth. Vanessa, looking up, beheld a being who presented so remarkable a likeness to a picture of St. George which she had always been desperately in love with in default of a living hero, that in her admiration and surprise she stumbled up one step, and would have fallen but that he sprung forward to assist her. His eyes met hers as he just raised his hat, having helped her to regain her balance, and they certainly expressed as much admiration intentionally as hers did unintentionally. She did not see him again, but ever afterward he did duty in her imagination for every hero, knight, or prince of whom she read. To-day she half expects to see him standing there still, but there is only the landlord, with a couple of satellites in somewhat shiny black raiment.

Vanessa does ample justice to the luncheon prepared for them according to the best lights of the hotel cook. Sir Bertram, whose theory it is that women have all the meaner vices, including greediness, does yet not object to see them eat so long as they eat gracefully and ungluttonously; and, on this head, he can find no fault with Vanessa, who has the instincts of a lady to her finger-tips.

Luncheon over, the squire proposes a stroll to look at the shops and the sea—the vicar makes a call on a learned friend who lives on the outskirts of the town. A good many of Sir Bertram's acquaintances would be considerably surprised to see him standing patiently on the pavement whilst his fair companion flattens her nose with eager delight against the trumpery little shop-window. At first, in shyness and fear of him, she had offered to pass them by without lingering, but he had caught the yearning look in her eyes, and said at once, in his best and most reassuring manner:

"We have come out for a day's pleasuring, and I know what one of the favorite amusements of ladies is, so pray, my dear" (quite paternally). "gratify yourself to your heart's content."

So Vanessa takes her fill of rapture, and with difficulty represses the oh's and ah's which rush to her lips at the sight of so many treasures. Perhaps the jeweler's shop pleases her the most.

"A poor show," observes Sir Bertram, with some contempt. "Now what is your idea of the prettiest object here?" and, without hesitation, Vanessa points to a somewhat old-fashioned gold locket with a spray of turquoise forget-me-nots set in the center.

"Your taste is good," the squire says, approvingly—"that is really the only pretty thing in the window."

She smiles, liking to be praised as every woman does who is what John Brandon calls "a woman all over."

Presently they come out upon the sea, and make their way to the end of the short wooden pier. And there Vanessa stands,

rapt and silent, forgetful of the squire and of everything and every one on earth. She stands and looks at the dark-blue water flecked with green and purple, dancing, shining, glittering in the sun, and the wild yearning sweeps over her which the sea kindles in some hearts. It fills the happy with a mighty sense of power and rapture; to them it is like a pulse beating madly with joy, with all the strength, vitality, and buoyancy of youth; to the wretched it is full of cruelty and mockery, overwhelming them with a sense of immeasurable despair. Vanessa's heart is filled with a mad yearning for happiness and pleasure—she is carried out of herself; she leans her arms on the wooden balustrade and looks into the sapphire waters with entranced eyes, as though they pierced the waves and saw some Paradise beneath.

And the squire, who no longer experiences sensations himself, and is as *blase* as most men who have lived much and thought much, and off whom time has worn what small veneration they once possessed, watches her with a certain curiosity, if without any particular sympathy. Sympathy! nay, no word in the vocabulary could be less appropriate to describe Sir Bertram's feelings at any time than that.

He would have defined the girl's passionate yearnings as the strong animal instincts of youth; wonder inspired by the unknown, the unexperienced; curiosity struggling against ignorance.

CHAPTER V.

THIS was one of the few days which Vanessa had passed in her life worthy to be marked with a white stone. Could she foresee the strange transformation her life is to undergo—the mingled pains and passions, raptures and agonies that lie before her—would she shrink back terrified, or would she go boldly out to meet her fate? Promise a young and passionate heart love, and bliss through love, and what will it reckon of any after-pang!

Sir Bertram, having resolved that this lovely girl should be his, laid himself out consistently for the achievement of his purpose; put aside his autocratic airs, and forebore to launch the withering sarcasms, the cynical strictures, which he, as a rule, indulged in.

As they were nearing home, he produced from his breast pocket a morocco case and presented it to Vanessa.

"When one goes on a jaunt one buys fairings," he says, in the mellowest tone he can command.

Vanessa's face flushes with delight and surprise as she opens the case and finds there the locket with the forget-me-not spray.

"Oh, Sir Bertram! Oh, papa!"

The squire reflects how often he has spent hundreds of pounds on a jewel and not won a fiftieth part of the gratitude that beams from the lovely eyes now gazing into his. It convinces him more than ever that women ought to be slaves, looking to one hand alone for their pleasures; not allowed to rove about in freedom, growing capricious, insatiable, intolerable in their vagaries like wild, irresponsible animals (as they are); corrupted

by admiration, and devoured by overweening vanity and impudent confidence in the unlimited power of their own beauty.

As Vanessa and her father sit over their "high tea" that evening, the vicar says, breaking from one of his accustomed reveries:

"Do you know, my dear, I think we have been rather in the habit of misjudging Sir Bertram. The thought really concerns me."

"Yes," replied Vanessa, eagerly, "I'm sure we have. I am quite sorry for all the names I have called him. He is quite a dear old man, and I will never say another word against him."

Three or four days pass—again the vicar and his daughter have dined at the Hall—the squire has paid a visit to the Vicarage, bringing in his own hand an offering of choice fruit to Vanessa, and spending nearly an hour seated beside her in that bower where Brandon first espied her. He, Brandon, is not in any danger of being forgotten by her—when a girl's heart is ripe for love, and she has seen and spoken with a man who stands to her in the light of a possible lover, however different he may in point of fact be from the ideal she once conceived, it would take something more than a trip to the sea or the attentions of an elderly beau like Sir Bertram to wrest her thoughts from him. It is with the keenest pleasure she has ever experienced that she reads a letter which her father hands her one morning at breakfast:

"MY DEAR WENTWORTH,—You are still, I hope, turning over in your mind the possibility of paying me a visit here. I suppose it can hardly be managed just yet, because, when you do come, you must stay at least two or three weeks, and there is your substitute to be arranged for. The season is all but over, and next week I go to Goodwood, having a month since agreed to make one of a party for the races. But I am longing to show Miss Wentworth the wonders of town, and, by the way, don't you forget the benefit to be derived for the *magnum opus* by your visit. I wonder whether you will vote me a bore if I run down on Thursday for a day or two? I have fallen in love with your rural dwelling-place; the pure air there seems to give me fresh life. I discovered, after I left you, on my way back to L—, a charming little inn about six miles from you, and I am going to send a horse there, so that I can ride over and see you of a day, and thus not run the risk of wearing out my welcome, as I hope to repeat my visit once or twice during the summer and autumn. I promise not to interfere with your graver occupations—perhaps Miss Wentworth will take pity upon me and let me dawdle about and enjoy the *dolce far niente* in her company.

"Yours ever,

JOHN BRANDON."

Vanessa looks, as she feels, delighted.

"But, papa," she cries, "why should he not come here?"

"I think," answers her father, unconsciously betraying a little of the combined selfishness of the man and the bookworm, "I think his suggestion is a very good one."

"I dare say," remarks Vanessa, her head already teeming with

plans for his amusement, "the squire will ask him up to dinner one night, if he knows that he is here." And her fancy draws a charming picture of herself and Brandon standing out together on the terrace in the glories of the golden sunset, looking first at the earthly paradise before them, and then—perhaps—in the soul's paradise of each other's eyes, whilst the squire and her father sit over their wine in the dining-room, as befits elderly gentlemen. She persists in ignoring that Brandon and her father are contemporaries, though she perfectly well remembers that the squire is old enough to be her grandfather. She counts the hours until he shall come—she stands in front of her glass pinning up and pulling down her auburn locks a dozen times before she can decide what style becomes her best. When he arrives, she greets him like an old friend, and Brandon finds the glances of her lovely eyes terribly upsetting to his honorable theories about not taking advantage of her ignorance of the world, and his exceptional position as the only eligible man of her acquaintance. He sees and knows that, if he uttered words of love, she would listen to them; he burns to speak them, yet refrains, but what his lips hesitate to reveal his eyes unsparingly betray. What man can look at a beautiful woman whom he already loves with cold, unexpressive eyes? If there be one so altogether self-contained, it is not Brandon. He arrives between two and three, and intends to ride away again at seven. Being the most thoughtful and considerate of men, it has occurred to him that to entertain him may tax their powers too much—he has therefore made known by letter the intended time and duration of his visit.

He and Vanessa are sitting under the shade of a big tree. Her lips are rippling over with gay talk, and her eyes beam smiles upon him. Brandon is unusually silent—his whole attention is concentrated in watching her. And, indeed, she has a face so perfect that you may look forever without discovering a flaw, and so varying in expression that it defies you to weary by long gazing.

"I have been quite gay since you were here," she tells him; "the most wonderful event has occurred."

"Really?" he says, smiling. "You pique my curiosity."

"Do you remember," she proceeds, her eyes brimming over with laughter, "that I told you our squire was a horrid, disagreeable old wretch, and that I hated him?"

"I do," smiles Brandon. "And I remember pitying him for having inspired you with such a bad opinion."

"Well," says Vanessa, gayly, "he is changed—a complete transformation has come over him. He is quite a dear, and I love him."

Lest the reader should at any time be surprised by this maiden, shut up in the country, expressing herself like a woman of fashion, I must recall to him that she is the bosom friend of two young ladies who are in the world's charmed circle, and whose ideas and expressions she is apt to imbibe and imitate.

"He is quite a dear now, is he?" echoes Brandon. "And what has he done to change your opinion so suddenly?"

"Until this time," says Vanessa, "he was always horrid and disagreeable: he took no notice of me, and, indeed, I used to run away and hide if I saw him coming. but this time"—exultingly—"he has asked us twice to dinner, and was so kind and pleasant, not a bit like what he was or what I fancied him; he sends us the most lovely fruit, and on Saturday—only think!—he drove us over in his carriage to B—to spend the day. I never spent such a delightful day in my life. And"—taking the locket at her white throat between her fingers—"he bought me this."

Brandon has not the smallest difficulty in reading between the lines.

"The old wretch!" he says to himself, and a sick shudder goes through him, "how horrible! how monstrous!" His thoughts change the expression of his eyes, as, looking at her, he feels the horror of her young beauty being given to a heartless old *roue*.

Vanessa glances at him in surprise.

"Why do you look like that?" she says.

"Like what!" and Brandon smiles and shakes off the disagreeable sensation that just now possessed him.

"I do not believe," observes Vanessa, "that you heard what I was talking about. You were thinking of something else. I was telling you of the squire's kindness, and you looked as if you saw something disagreeable behind me. I haven't got a caterpillar or anything horrid crawling on me, have I?" putting up her hand.

"No," he laughs. "But you are mistaken. I heard every word you said. You told me that the squire had changed from a horrid old monster to 'quite a dear.' Now what," looking keenly at her, "what do you suppose has changed him so?"

"I cannot think," answers Vanessa; but even whilst she speaks, having an honest and straightforward nature, the warm blood rushes to her cheek, half at her own consciousness, half at the meaning of his tone.

Brandon, incapable of the cruelty of continuing to look at a blushing woman, averts his eyes.

"There is a caterpillar, though," he says, espying one crawling on the arm of the bench. "What a handsome fellow!"

"Do not touch it!" exclaims Vanessa, shuddering. "I loathe caterpillars. Is it not strange," she adds, "that being a country-girl I have a horror of insects? I do not mind mice or frogs, but an insect crawling on me makes all my blood run cold."

Her blush has faded; the cause of it is forgotten after this momentary distraction, and they fall to talking of other objects.

Presently Susan is seen advancing with a tray of peaches, grapes, and strawberries.

"Sir Bertram has just sent you these, miss, with his compliments," she says. "I thought you would like me to bring them out now."

Vanessa falls into raptures over the peaches and strawberries.

"We will have a feast," she exclaims to Brandon, with glee.

tening eyes, preparing to help him to the best of the tray's contents; but, to her immense chagrin, he excuses himself. Why does he? he is particularly fond of fruit. Somehow he feels that Sir Bertram's fruit would set his teeth on edge—he is certain that the old man is trying to buy Vanessa as old men buy love, or what does duty for it, with gifts.

As he rides thoughtfully home that evening, his scruples about declaring his love to Vanessa become fainter. Surely any fate would be preferable for her than to fall into the clutches of that hard, cruel old man, whom he knows so well by reputation. He can scarcely fancy that a lovely, warm-hearted creature could be induced to marry such a man, but pretty women are like butterflies; and titles, jewels, and riches are lights at which they are very much given to flying. To-morrow he has promised to stay later and dine at the Vicarage; he is sorely tempted to promise himself that in the twilight, if he and Vanessa find themselves together alone, he will tell her something of the love for her of which his heart is so full. Absence has made her impression upon him deeper, and when he sees her again, he feels that she is yet more than in absence he had dreamed her.

The next day finds him once more sitting beside Vanessa under the big tree. The warmth of his heart is stealing into his words and looks. Vanessa is radiant with happiness. He bends toward her—there is undoubtedly something of the lover in his attitude, when Sir Bertram and the vicar are seen coming toward them. Sir Bertram sustains a severe shock at this spectacle—it takes him utterly by surprise—his anger is kindled in a moment. A serpent in the Eden which he thought his! the ears of the future Lady Orford being polluted by the admiration of a strange man! A dull rage possesses the soul of the autocrat.

Brandon and Vanessa rise—the girl puts out her hand, which the squire takes, without looking at her companion.

“How d’ye do, Sir Bertram?” says Brandon, quietly, about to offer his hand naturally, if reluctantly, to his acquaintance.

“How do you do, *Mister* Brandon?” returns the squire, in freezing accents, ignoring the half-extended hand.

John Brandon has none of that morbid sensitiveness which makes some men rather look out for slights. He is, besides, on terms of intimacy with men who occupy a considerably higher station in the world than Sir Bertram, but there is something so strangely rude in the latter's manner, an air as of a superior being resenting a presumptuous familiarity, that the warm color rushes to Brandon's cheek, and he turns away and addresses himself to the vicar.

Vanessa, accustomed to the squire's manner before his regeneration, does not remark anything particular. She hastens to offer her thanks for his present of yesterday, and, meantime, her father and Brandon have walked a little way apart.

“You know Mr. Brandon, do you not?” Vanessa says naturally, to the squire. “He tells me he has met you.”

“I know him insomuch that he is my wine-merchant,” replies Sir Bertram, with an accent as contemptuous and indif-

ferent as though he said, "he is my butler," or "he blacks my boots."

Vanessa turns pale—a pang goes through her heart—she feels as though she had been made the victim of some cruel deception. To her idea a wine-merchant has much the same status as a grocer or a linen-draper. What education she has imbibed on the subject of social relations is from Edith and Mabel, who always speak of trade with an irrepressible widening of the nostrils and contraction of the bridges of their little noses. Trade is low—people connected with business are unknowable, unless (there is a rider to their verdict)—unless they are so enormously rich that they are refined and purified by the amount of their gold.

Sir Bertram sees, with extreme satisfaction, that his maneuver has been successful—he has lowered Brandon in Vanessa's eyes—there is quite a look of shame and trouble in her face.

"I came," he says, altering his voice to a pleasant and friendly inflection, "to beg you and your father to dine with me to-night. I find," with quite a gallant air, "that your presence at my table spoils me for my own company."

"Thank you," replied Vanessa, "but Mr. Brandon is dining with us to-night, and we cannot leave him."

Her dream of the squire inviting their guest to the Hall has vanished into thin air—she is not sure that she any longer desires such a consummation.

"I am sorry," says Sir Bertram, as though he never for an instant entertained the faintest idea of including Brandon in his invitation.

And yet he had sat next him once at a select dinner given by Lord W—, and voted him afterward a very pleasant fellow.

This, however, was not for Vanessa to know—the squire intended her to receive the impression, as she did, that Brandon belonged to a class as wide apart from his as the poles. Presently he seated himself beside her on the rustic bench, and remained a considerable time talking to her. He was gratified to see that she wore the locket he had presented to her.

"I hope," he said, "that when our friendship becomes better cemented, you will let me bring you something much more suited, not to adorn, but to be adorned by you."

He speaks with his grand air, perfectly courteous and friendly, entirely devoid of any lover-like accent.

Vanessa is flattered and not repelled. The vicar returns after a time, but not Brandon. He is inexpressibly ruffled—he scarcely ever remembers to have been so annoyed by a trifle. It is not until Sir Bertram has departed that he rejoins Vanessa. A strange alteration has taken place in her manner. She seems shy, embarrassed; her pretty, confident, familiar manner toward him is gone—she scarcely looks at him, has little to say, yet seems afraid of a pause. And when she sees her father in the distance, she runs to him and brings him back with her.

What in the name of fortune can Sir Bertram have said or done to her? is the thought which racks John Brandon's brain and

makes him absent and *distract* for the rest of the evening. Has he proposed to her? and, great Heaven! is it possible she can have accepted him? Brandon's conscience is too honest and clear even for the thought to cross him that the squire can have said anything to his detraction. He had assigned the correct motive, jealousy, to the latter's rudeness toward himself, but Sir Bertram must indeed exercise a strong influence over Vanessa if the expression of his displeasure was able to effect such an instant and complete change in her mood and manner. The hour of sunset came; then twilight; the moon rose and Juliet was there, as lovely as ever—he was even with her for a few minutes, but to-night she was not Juliet, only a beautiful ice-maiden, and Brandon could find no words with which to thaw her. His fire could not melt her boldness; on the contrary, her coldness extinguished his fire.

He was going back to London to-morrow—a chill feeling smote him that he would never return—his romance had been brief, and was ended now.

"Good-bye," he said, looking almost sorrowfully at Vanessa's lovely face.

"Good-bye," she answered. She did not say:

"When are you coming again?"

CHAPTER VI.

VANESSA stands again at her window and looks out at the moonlit night. She has no questions to ask of the stars to-night; no hopes for the future kindle her eyes; no heavenly visions of given and requited love. A sense of bitter disappointment gnaws her heart. She had dreamed of a hero and found—a wine-merchant. Never, surely, were two words in the English language so hideously married. Wanted a Romeo. Found a wine merchant. She still writhes under Sir Bertram's contemptuous words and accent. She does not know that no well-bred man despises another because of his occupation, and that sneers at trade are reserved for *parvenus* and *nouveaux riches*. Nor does she for an instant suspect that this assumed disdain was partly a ruse of Sir Bertram's, partly an outcome of jealous anger. Speaking to a woman in society, he would have chosen any weapon rather than that; but, with Vanessa, he was tolerably sure of producing his effect. This time last night how happy she was! how proudly her castles reared their crests against the sky! what happy riot of hope and pleasure ran in her brain! She half loved already—half thought herself beloved—a future brimful of joy and pleasure was within her grasp. Where are her castles now? Ruined, crumbled, lying in dust and disgrace. She is half indignant with Brandon for his presumption—how dare he counterfeited the gentleman so well! how dare he offer to make love to her! Then she remembers that, after all, he and her father were at college together, and her brain becomes wearied and perplexed by a host of contradictory ideas.

"Papa!" she says next morning at breakfast. A nervous tremor disconcerts her; blushes are ready to fly through her fair

skin, but the vicar is the most absent of men, and scarcely ever sees the person who addresses him. "Papa! when did you first know Mr. Brandon?"

Her father makes a violent effort, and pulls his mind out of the rut of thought in which it is crawling. He has to repeat her words before he quite realizes the sense of them.

"When did I first know Brandon? We were at Eton together. His father's place in Blankshire was near my grandfather's."

"Who was his father?" asks Vanessa.

The vicar passes his hand for a moment across his brow before replying.

"He was Colonel Brandon—a very extravagant man. Ultimately, the place had to be sold—he and John's elder brother cut off the entail between them. I forget what became of William Brandon, but John went to India and made some money there, and came home, and, he tells me, set up as a wine-merchant, and is doing a very good business."

"Then he *was* a gentleman!" exclaims Vanessa, with some eagerness.

Her father looks across at her with a surprised air.

"What do you mean, my dear? He was and *is* a gentleman," with emphasis.

"Do gentlemen go into trade?" and, this time the blood runs riot at its own sweet will in Vanessa's cheeks.

"A *gentleman*," returns her father, "thinks no honest way of earning an honorable living beneath him. Why, my dear, did you suppose that there were only two sorts of gentlemen? Squires like Sir Bertram and poor parsons like myself?"

"No," says Vanessa, confused, "but——"

"But what?"

The vicar for once concentrates his thoughts on the person he is speaking to, and looks keenly at his daughter.

"Sir Bertram spoke of him in a slighting sort of way as his wine-merchant," proceeds Vanessa, growing extremely uncomfortable.

"Sir Bertram did!" repeats the vicar, with unequivocal astonishment. "My dear child, you must have mistaken his meaning."

"I do not think so," says Vanessa, shaking her head.

"Well, well," remarks her father, as if the point was not worth arguing. "At all events, disabuse your mind of the idea that business is degrading to a gentleman. John Brandon is as true a gentleman as ever stepped, and the associate of gentlemen. Lord A——, who was at Eton with us, is still one of his most intimate friends."

Susan making her appearance at this juncture, the current of the vicar's thoughts is turned, and he does not revert to the subject.

Vanessa wends her way to her rose-bower, a third pleased, a third sorry, a third indignant. The latter emotion is provoked by the squire. Why did he put such mean thoughts into her head? They were mean—she would have called them snobbish had she

been conversant with the word and its application. She is pleased because her taste and inclination in liking Brandon are vindicated—she is sorry because she feels that she has behaved in a way that must have been both incomprehensible and wounding to him. Then a sudden, burning shame overcomes her. Was it incomprehensible to him, or had he guessed the reason of her altered manner? If he had, how he must despise her! Now he has gone, gone perhaps forever; and, at this thought, two tears steal into Vanessa's eyes. Her romance had come to her, and she had pushed it away with her own hands—she might never have another. She could still not help wishing that her possible lover had been a gentleman at large: his occupation rather tarnishes the gilt of her gingerbread. But now her gingerbread is gone altogether. Sir Bertram finds her silent and *distrained* at dinner; the vivacity which he considers her chief charm is fled—he connects the loss with Brandon, and feels bitter and displeased. He does not, however, betray these emotions to his fair guest.

"Your friends, Edith and Mabel, are coming the day after to-morrow," he tells her when dinner is over, and, at this intelligence, her eyes brighten and all her face is illumined by pleasure.

Sir Bertram has had many conflicting opinions about the expediency of having his granddaughters at the Hall. He by no means relishes the thought of being addressed as "Grandpapa" before his future bride, who is of the same age as themselves—nor does he like the idea of their inquisitive glances and surmises. But on the other hand, they have both come out this season and are very full of the world's gayeties and vanities, and their eager description of its pleasures will perhaps excite in Vanessa's breast a desire to participate in them herself. If he could only forbid them, under awful pains and penalties, ever to speak of young men or lovers in her presence.

Sir Bertram has reflected, besides, that a visit from his granddaughters will supply the pretext for constant intercourse between the Hall and the Vicarage, and will show him more of Vanessa's natural disposition than he is likely to see when he is playing host to her alone and she is fulfilling the part of an amiable and obliging guest for his sole edification.

Three mornings later, Vanessa receives by hand the following note:

"DEAREST NESSA,—Your friends arrived last night, and are dying to hug you. Come up *as soon as ever you can* after you get this. The old Gorgon is quite amiable, and we have a sort of an idea from the way he talked about you last night that he is in love with you. This will be *nuts for you*. We have heaps to tell you, and, if you don't come soon, our hearts will burst from the impossibility of containing all the news that now oppresses them. So fly to us *just as you are*. You are to spend the whole day—the O. G. suggested it himself.

"Your loving MABEL."

Vanessa, who has lately been in a despondent mood, recovers

her cheerfulness on the spot, and prepares to obey the summons. Half an hour after the receipt of the letter she enters the sitting-room allotted by the squire to his granddaughters. She is received by these young ladies with every demonstration of joy—they smother her with kisses—between them they almost tear her to pieces.

Edith is eighteen, not quite a year older than her sister, and is unquestionably the prettier of the two, but Mabel is full of archness and vivacity, which makes her more attractive in the eyes of some people. Edith is disposed to be romantic; Mabel finds it almost impossible to look seriously at anything, and is always brimming over with fun and turning every one into ridicule. She affects an extravagant style of speech, and revels in adjectives and superlatives.

“My adored Nessa,” she cries, showering a second series of embraces upon her friend, “how too delightful it is to see you again! And how lovely you have grown! No wonder you have turned the old Gorgon’s brain. Tell us, my angel, is it true that he is in love with you, as we suspect?”

Vanessa laughs gayly.

“What a goose you are, Mab!” she says.

“The *madre*,” pursues Mabel, “is in a horrid fright. She thinks the old gentleman is going to marry you, and do us out of his money.”

“Mab!” expostulates her sister, with a side-frown.

“Nonsense!” retorts Mabel. “We have no secrets from Nessa. And as if she would look at the old horror! Not but what I think I should, if I were her. Oh, my love, if you knew,” clasping her hands, “what a heavenly place London is, and the delights of a season there, you would skip to the altar in the twinkling of an eye with anybody who asked you—that is, anybody who had money. ‘I would,’ *chasser*-ing all round the room, ‘like a shot, because you can’t really enjoy life without a husband.’”

Vanessa looks deeply interested. She thinks Mabel alludes to the joys of love and companionship.

“But,” she says, “if you have a husband, I hardly see that you would care so much about London or the season.”

Mabel stops in front of her.

“*Chere ingenue*,” utters this minx of seventeen, “you misapprehend your friend. Let me enumerate to you the advantages of a husband. In the first place, he enables you to flirt as you could not possibly flirt without him; in the second, he makes you ten times more admired than if you were unmarried; in the third, he pays your bills, and, let us hope, looks pleasant; and to wind up all, once you are married, you may say and do just whatever you like, and nobody is shocked.”

“Really, Mab,” interrupts her sister, looking displeased, “you are too much for anything. If mamma could hear you, she would be exceedingly angry.”

“I dare say,” retorts Mabel, proceeding with a *pas seul*; “but she is not likely to hear me. In company I am quite a well brought up little girl without eyes and ears. I don’t see any-

thing that is going on under my nose, and I don't, of course, being very innocent, understand the things that grown-up people talk about. However, Miss Prim, you know what I say is true; and pray did not mamma say herself that times were indeed changed since she was young? for then the girls danced and flirted and amused themselves, and the married women sat and looked on."

"Edie," asks Vanessa, turning to the elder sister, "how-much of what this madcap says is true? Married women don't really dance and—flirt, do they?"

"Unfortunately, they do," answers Edith, gravely. "It is an awful shame, but girls are quite neglected nowadays—in comparison, I mean."

"I don't mind a bit," chimes in Miss Mabel, "whether the girls or the married women flirt, as long as I belong to the set who have the *best time*. Just now it is the thing to be married, so married I mean to be. Only think, my angel, that stupid Edith might have been rolling, rolling in money now but for her silly, idiotic, romantic nonsense. There's a man with thousands, any quantity of thousands, a year who would have proposed to her if she had given him the least encouragement; instead of which she goes and falls in love with a detrimental, which, being interpreted, is a penniless young man with a good-looking face and no expectations."

Vanessa glances sympathetically at the elder sister, who blushes faintly.

"Don't listen, Nessa dear, to the nonsense this child talks," she says; "and now, Mab, pray hold your tongue for five minutes, if you can, and let somebody else get in a word edge-ways."

"No, I sha'n't," cries Mabel. "I am going to tell Nessa about my offer. Fancy, my sweet love, only one offer all the season, and I expected dozens. I always thought when one came out, if one was at all decent looking," surveying herself complacently in a mirror, "that almost every other man you met went on his knees and said, 'Will you be mine?' more for the sake of being civil than anything else, and not really expecting to be taken at his word, because, of course, all one wants is the pleasure of refusing him. Dearest Nessa! only one wretched, measly little offer all the season—from a youth in the Foreign Office, with about enough money to keep him in gardenias and cigarettes. He was awfully in love with me, and after I had *spurned* him, I looked every day in the *Morning Post*, expecting to see that he had committed suicide, but he didn't. May Harley met him out at dinner the next night, and told me he ate and drank enormously. I wouldn't have minded the drinking, because that would have looked like despair, but no decent-minded man *eats* after a disappointment. It's my belief that the young men of the day are a very deteriorated race."

Vanessa laughs.

"My dear child," she says, "as if any man could possibly think seriously of marrying such a madcap as you."

"I'm just the sort some men like," returns Mabel, gravely.

"I dare say it will be a man about the age of grandpapa, though not such an old horror, of course, but some good-tempered and pleasant old person who would let me do just as I like. By the way, Nessa, I am dying to see grandpapa spoon you—it will throw a new light upon his character. Though, do you know," mysteriously, with a glance over her shoulder to make sure Sir Bertram is not within earshot, "I heard Hawkins say to Marter that he wasn't quite what people down here fancied him, and that he had actresses and all sorts of people at his place on the river. You know, Edie, he never would have us there on a Sunday, though mamma wanted to go down several times."

"I wish to goodness, Mab," interrupts her sister, impatiently, "that you would go into the garden and take off some of your exuberant vitality, and let me and Vanessa have a little peace."

Mab stands pirouetting in the center of the floor. Suddenly bringing her gyrations to a close, she says:

"Well, I don't mind leaving you together for an hour on one condition—that is, that I shall have Nessa all to myself for an hour this afternoon."

Vanessa is accustomed to being bartered about between the pair, each liking to tell her own stories and affairs without comment, parentheses, or contradictions from the other.

So, after once more flinging her arms round Vanessa's neck, and telling her she is quite the loveliest creature and the greatest angel in the world, Mabel takes herself off to beguile her hour of waiting.

Edith is two months younger than Vanessa. Each of the sisters likes to think she is the favorite of the vicar's daughter, but, truth to tell, Vanessa would be extremely puzzled to decide which she is fonder of. Mabel, with her great fund of spirits and gayety, amuses her, but Edith is more sympathetic. And at this moment, when she is disposed to be somewhat sad and sentimental, the society of Edith is more congenial to her.

Scarcely has Mabel left them when Vanessa takes her place on the couch beside Edith, and says, in a pretty, caressing whisper:

"Tell me, darling, is it true what Mab says? Do you care for some one?"

"Yes," answers Edith, leaning her cheek against her friend's shoulder, "it is quite true. Oh, Nessa!" in a mournful voice, "it is dreadful to be in love when things won't go right."

"Why shouldn't they go right?" asks Vanessa. "If you love him, and he loves you, what can anything else matter?"

"It wouldn't matter here," answers Edith, "if we lived down in the country and never went away from it, but you don't know, darling Nessa, how different it is in the world. In society, if a girl marries a poor man, her people hate it, and are furious. She has to live in a wretched, poky way, quite different from what she is accustomed to; and then, the worst of it is, the man gets to hate it, and to be discontented, and to wish he hadn't married her. Not that I think Algy ever would, but you can't tell. There's Lady Blanche Hope. Last year every one was talking about her romantic marriage. They were the most

devoted couple ever seen, and I met her this season, and she talked to me so awfully kindly and nicely; I suppose she saw that Algy and I were fond of each other. She said, 'Don't, my dear, marry a poor man. If you are obliged to live in London and go into society, it is utterly fatal. I don't care how much he loves you to begin with. The man feels being poor worse than the woman, and the moment he feels it, he makes you suffer ten times over for every annoyance or restraint that is put upon him.'

"But," says Vanessa, "is he so very poor, and must he live in London?"

"He is a younger son, and he is in the Guards," answers Edith, shaking her head. "I will show you his picture." And, going to her desk, she produces two portraits in different attitudes of a very good-looking young man, in the undress uniform of the Guards.

"Oh!" utters Vanessa, drawing a long breath. Then, looking up curiously at her friend, she asks with unconscious *naivete*, "Are there many men like that in London?"

Edith smiles with gratified vanity.

"Not many so handsome as Algy," she says. "But"—impartially—"there are great numbers of good-looking men. Oh, Nessa!" she adds, with enthusiasm, "how I should like you to go to London, and what a success you would have. Men would rave about you." Then, returning to the subject of Algy, she continues, dolefully:

"It is too dreadful to be in love. When you are apart, you never know a happy moment. Then mamma worries so about the other man—the man with money Mab was talking about. My people don't know it, but he really proposed to me."

"Did he?" exclaims Vanessa, with sparkling eyes. "Tell me about him. I suppose, though, he is old and ugly."

"No, he isn't. He is about thirty, and really not bad-looking, and he is rich, quite rich. Before I fell in love with Algy I had begun to think seriously of him, but after Algy, I could not bear the sight of him. I will tell you what set me against him. Swear you won't tell!" fixing her eyes on Vanessa's face with almost tragic solemnity.

"I swear," responds Vanessa, with all a girl's eagerness to hear a secret.

"One day we were alone together and he suddenly caught hold of me and kissed me. It was the most horrid sensation," shuddering, "I ever experienced. Do you know I really think I would rather have had a tooth out."

Both these sensations being unknown to Vanessa, she only responds by a look of sympathy.

"But," she observes, after a moment's pause, "I suppose you would not have felt like that if it had been Algy?"

Edith laughs, and buries her face in her friend's neck.

"Not at all," she answers. "Quite the contrary."

"Edie," says Vanessa, presently, trying to control her voice, "did you ever meet any one called Brandon in London?"

"Brandon?" repeats Edith. "Brandon? Rather a nice-looking, darkish man; not very young?"

"Yes."

At this moment the door is flung open, and Mab returns in a state of wild excitement.

"It is only half an hour," exclaims Edith; "it isn't fair."

"Ah, but wait till you hear what I have got to tell you!" cries Mab. Then, flying to Vanessa and nearly throttling her, she says:

"My beloved grandmother! let me salute your ladyship!"

CHAPTER VII.

"THERE is no doubt," proceeds Mab, seating herself at Vanessa's feet, and speaking more calmly,—"there is no doubt that you are destined to be Lady Orford. Nothing else could account for the extraordinary fact I am about to reveal to you. Five minutes ago I happened to go into the stables, when what should I see in the middle of the yard but the coach getting furbished and burnished up.

"What are you doing with the coach?" I said to Simpson.

"Sir Bertram's ordered it for four o'clock this afternoon," said Simpson:

"I opened my mouth so wide at this that a butterfly flew into it and choked me. You know grandpapa hasn't had a team out for four years. I went off down the garden in a state of stupefaction, and met the old Gorgon coming up to the house. I was obliged to ask him (I couldn't help it) whether he was going to take us out, and he smiled benevolently, like a death's-head trying to do the amiable, and said:

"I thought you young ladies would like to drive over to the White House farm, and perhaps have tea there."

"At that, my loves, quite forgetting who I was interviewing, I threw up my hat and said, 'Hooray!' and instead of turning me to stone by one glare, he grinned more than ever and walked off."

Vanessa and Edith are almost as much excited by this extraordinary intelligence as Mab.

"It must be you!" says Edith, looking with wonder and admiration at her friend. "Tell us, Nessa, how did you and grandpapa come to be so friendly?"

Vanessa is on the point of relating the episode of the borrowed dinner, but the sense of shame which always overcomes her at the remembrance of it stops her.

"I met him the first evening of his return, she says, "and he was very kind and polite, and sent us down some fruit in the evening, and asked us to dinner next day."

"My only fear is," observes Mabel, with great solemnity, scanning her friend's face, "that, not knowing what other men are like, you might be induced to become his bride; and then—oh! my dear, when you see real men, you will drown yourself in despair."

"I have seen what other men are like," returns Vanessa, with a shade of triumph—"we have had one at the Vicarage."

"No!" exclaims Mab. "Not really!"

"Yes—an old college friend of papa's."

"Oh!" utters Mab, contemptuously. "I don't call that any more a man than grandpapa."

"Was it the Mr. Brandon you were asking me about?" interposes Edith.

Vanessa nods.

"Do you remember, Mab," continues Edith, "rather a nice looking man who sat between us one night at the Greys?"

"Yes," responds Mab. "But," she adds, a trifle superciliously, "I don't think he was anybody very much."

Vanessa flushes scarlet in a moment.

"He is a gentleman," she says, warmly.

"Oh, of course he is a gentleman!" responds Miss Mab, "or we should not have been likely to meet him. I only mean that he is not to be considered as a *parti*."

"Why not?" exclaims Vanessa, irritated to find her former sentiments echoed by her friend.

"He is in business," replies Mab, coolly; "and unless a man makes at least twenty thousand a year by business, he cannot be recognized in our set as marriageable. One may be civil to him, but——"

"He was at Eton and Oxford with papa," interrupts Vanessa, still more warmly—"he is the son of a country gentleman, he is a *great* friend of Lord A——, and papa says that a *gentleman* is never above making his living in an honorable manner."

Vanessa is not only championing her friend's position against Mabel, but also against her own doubt of him, of which in the last few days she has become very much ashamed.

"Oho!" cries mischievous Mab. "So the old G. has a rival, has he?"

"Do not tease her. How disagreeable you are, Mab!" exclaims Edith, to whom it occurs that Mr. Brandon, if not quite a suitable alliance for herself or her sister, might make an excellent husband for the vicar's daughter.

"I didn't mean to tease you, darling," says Mab, rushing at Vanessa and embracing her. "I wouldn't for the world. He is quite nice, and I like him very much, and I am sure I would far, far rather have him than grandpapa. And he doesn't keep a shop! Not that that matters. Why, Lady Maria Hanson was delighted to marry her daughter the other day to young Woolshank, whose father is a linen draper!"

"But," protests Vanessa, "you seem as if you could think of nothing but marrying and giving in marriage!"

"Because, my sweet love," returns Mab, "that is the only object of a respectable woman's existence after she has once been presented. It's a *career*; it's like choosing a profession or going into Parliament. Look at the glorious possibilities in front of a girl. Why," commencing a fresh war-dance, for she can never be quiet five minutes together, "I might be a countess by this time next year if I happened to take the fancy of an earl. It's

all done in a minute. He meets you at a ball or a garden-party, or in the Row; he falls in love with you; he says, 'I cannot live without this divine creature—she *must* be mine.' You rather hesitate, and give yourself airs not to let him see that you are dying to jump down his throat: he becomes madder, you consent at last, your engagement is announced in the society papers, two or three dowagers die of apoplexy from rage, their daughters turn green with envy, your mamma pretends not to be at all exalted, but rather gives people to understand that you really ought to have done better; you behave with condescending affability to your friends, who cover you with embraces and say every sort of horror of you behind your back; you get loads of wedding-presents because you don't want 'em, and there you are!"

There is no doubt that, in spite of her tender years, Miss Mab has developed a good deal of the cynicism which she has inherited from her maternal grandfather.

"Mab!" utters Vanessa, aghast, "where did you learn to talk in this dreadful, heartless manner?"

"In society, my love," returns Mab, laughing. "Everybody there hates everybody else; every one is jealous of every one; every one wants to drag every one else down; the only happy people are those who can stand on the top and kick the others as they are coming up."

"It sounds very clever," interrupts Edith, with some contempt; "but, my dear," to Vanessa, "it is only grandpapa at second-hand. Grandpapa and water. I have heard him say these things dozens of times. Any monkey can imitate."

"Monkeys are amusing, at all events," retorts Mab, "which is more than some people are."

The gong sounds at this moment, and Mab, forgetting her momentary wrath, cries:

"Now, my darling love, now for a real treat—now to see the old G. in his new part as the lover."

Luncheon is rather an embarrassing ordeal for Vanessa, who is quite conscious that three watchful pair of eyes are upon her, Mrs. Vaughan's suspiciously and distrustfully; Mab's full of malicious fun; Edith's inquiringly. To-day she has no control of her swift blood—a word from the squire sends it rushing through her cheeks; every nerve quivers with painful consciousness. Well pleased he notes this, and gloats over it, for people past feeling themselves are oftentimes wont to enjoy the evidences of extreme sensibility in others. His daughter's annoyance, in spite of her assumed composure, is evident to him, and gives zest to his enjoyment. Certainly he will make this beautiful young girl Lady Orford, and his daughter will have to pay homage to her ladyship, or it will be the worse for her.

He does not intend to invite Mrs. Vaughan to join their expedition this afternoon. Vanessa is to have the seat of honor.

And when the time arrives and the young lady is mounted beside the squire, she feels a very delightful sense of exhilaration and importance. She has never looked down upon life from such a giddy height before—as the people run out of their cot-

tages to gaze on the grand spectacle, she feels herself quite a great lady. She talks with animation to her companion, and is not a whit afraid of the criticism of his granddaughters behind. The swift passage through the air, the sunshine, the clatter of the horses' hoofs—everything combines to make her feel happy and blithe of heart.

Mab nudges her sister and gives her a significant look from time to time—the pair begin to feel ever so slight a falling off of their affection for the vicar's daughter, who is being put so ostentatiously before them. Until to-day she has always been the humble friend; now their grandfather seems bent on turning her head. But when, after dinner, they are all three walking with entwined arms in the garden, the momentary grudge is forgotten, although the topic is still under discussion.

"I am sure he means something," said Edith. "But, Nessa, you never could!"

"I never saw the old G. so human before!" chimes in Mab. "But all the same, Nessa, if I thought you could be so disgusting as to entertain any idea of the old horror, I could never love you more."

To which Vanessa replies by a peal of silvery laughter.

"You must not encourage him too much if you don't mean anything," says Edith, gently.

"Encourage him!" echoes Vanessa. "Why, Edie, you do not seriously suppose that Sir Bertram could think I would marry him, even if he condescended to ask me?"

"I hope I sha'n't be here when he proposes, if you refuse him," utters Mab. That is, if you do. But," suspiciously, "I am not so sure that you will. You look extremely delighted this afternoon."

"Of course I was delighted," cried Vanessa. "Why, I had never been on a coach before, and it was the most heavenly sensation I ever felt. Did you enjoy it too?"

"I might have done if I had had a nice young man next me," answers Mab. "It was not particularly exciting for Edie and me doing double gooseberry."

"It would have been much nicer if Mrs. Vaughan had gone, and we three had sat behind together," returns Vanessa.

"I'll suggest it to him next time," laughs Mab.

"Yes, I should think you would dare," observes Edith, scornfully.

Mrs. Vaughan, meantime, is feeling considerable uneasiness about her father's intentions. She has never seen him pay such marked attention to a young girl before. Nothing could be more displeasing or unsatisfactory to her than that he should marry, for, although the estate is entailed, Sir Bertram has a considerable amount of personal property at his disposal, and she has always looked forward to inheriting this. She is sufficiently well off, but is any one, however rich, indifferent to the thought of acquiring more? In any case it will be injurious to her daughters' position as marriageable girls should their grandfather marry a young wife. When Vanessa has taken her leave

Mrs. Vaughan minutely cross-examines Edith and Mabel about the events of the afternoon.

"How did the girl behave?" she asks. "I suppose she was delighted with your grandfather's attentions."

If the sisters had had a momentary doubt of Vanessa in their own minds, they will not acknowledge it to their mother, but champion her stoutly.

"She was pleased to drive on the coach," says Edith. "But, mamma dear, is it likely that any girl could possibly dream of marrying grandpapa?"

"Nothing more likely," returns Mrs. Vaughan. "A girl with no prospects, and nothing on earth to look forward to!"

"But you forget, mamma," interposes Miss Mabel, dryly, "that she hasn't been brought up like we have."

"You were not brought up to be impertinent," remarks her mother, "and yet you are so."

At this Mabel reddens, and retires huffily from the discussion.

"There is no doubt," proceeds Mrs. Vaughan, addressing her elder daughter, "that she is very good-looking. Men, I suppose, some men, at least, would admire her, though she is on a large scale, and will get coarse in time."

"Oh, mamma! I think she is quite lovely," exclaims Edith. "She makes me feel so small and insignificant."

"If," says Mrs. Vaughan, "I thought Sir Bertram had any serious thoughts about her, I would invite her to stay with us in town, and give her the opportunity of seeing other men."

"I rather fancy she has seen some one whom she very much prefers to grandpapa," observes Edith, "a Mr. Brandon, an old friend of her father's, only that he is not old. We met him once at the Greys'."

"Brandon!" repeats Mrs. Vaughan, thoughtfully. "Brandon!"

"I think he is a wine-merchant, but he is quite a gentleman."

"Oh!" And her mother looks interested. "But has he any idea of her, do you know?"

"I am not sure. She has only seen him two or three times."

"Try to find out," says Mrs. Vaughan, and then she rises, and leaves the room.

But the days pass, and Vanessa hears nothing of John Brandon, and the squire's attentions increase, and Mrs. Vaughan becomes seriously uneasy. Though not a particularly meek-spirited or nervous woman, she is afraid of her father, as most people are. But there is so much at stake that she plucks up her courage, and resolves to broach the subject of Vanessa to him. One evening, as they are sitting in the drawing-room, the girls having strolled into the garden, she commences her attack. Her heart flutters; it is some moments before she can command her voice sufficiently to speak with even tolerable unconcern.

"Vanessa is growing a handsome girl," she remarks at last.

The squire braces himself up for action, knowing perfectly well what is coming.

"Yes," he replies, in that peculiar dry voice which people who know him well dread.

"A little too tall, perhaps, but that does not matter so much now."

"Ah!"

"You seem to admire her very much"—trying to speak playfully.

"Yes."

Mrs. Vaughan grows embarrassed. If one's interlocutor will not take his share in the conversation, the position becomes awkward.

"You must not turn her head," smiling uneasily.

"How?"

"By encouraging false hopes in her."

"What do you call false hopes?" inquires Sir Bertram, in his driest, most disagreeable tone.

"I mean she might think you had serious intentions," returns Mrs. Vaughan, reddening uneasily.

"And suppose I have?" The squire transfixes his daughter with his keen glance.

Mrs. Vaughan regrets too late her rashness in making the attack, but she cannot draw back now.

"It would be running a great risk, would it not?" she hazards, nervously.

"Risk of what?" in his most biting tone.

"Such a disparity in years," murmurs Mrs. Vaughan.

"A man who has rank and wealth to give to a penniless girl has no disparities," says the squire, grimly.

"A young and handsome wife might cause you a good deal of uneasiness."

"I have no anxiety on that score," returns Sir Bertram, with a disagreeable smile. "When I marry, I shall take excellent care of my wife."

Mrs. Vaughan feels herself worsted, and becomes rather spiteful.

"You must keep Mr. Brandon out of the way," she says, trying to smile with indifferent success. But she has the pleasure of seeing that this shaft has gone home.

"Brandon!"

For once Sir Bertram's curiosity gets the better of his discretion. He has been painfully exercised in his mind more than once on the subject of Brandon—he could never forget the fellow's lover-like attitude, nor the expression of Vanessa's face, when he came upon them in the Vicarage garden that day.

"She seems to have a great *penchant* for him, from all I hear," proceeds Mrs. Vaughan, with secret triumph; "but I dare say she would contrive to forget him if you honored her by proposing to make her Lady Orford."

"Very probably, I should think," says the squire, icily, determined to wreak his revenge on his daughter. "At all events, if she is disposed to sell herself, I am disposed to make it well worth her while. By the way, what day will your fortnight here be up? Thursday?—ah, yes. You will go by the usual train, from L——, I suppose?"

So, by speaking, Mrs. Vaughan has only got her dismissal and

her father's displeasure. But, at all events, she knows that her worst fears are realized, for she does not believe for one moment that Vanessa will refuse to be Lady Orford when the opportunity is given her.

CHAPTER VIII.

It is with genuine regret that Vanessa bids farewell to the squire's granddaughters. The advent of John Brandon had brought a new element into her life—when he departed, she was conscious of a certain blankness, or void. Edith and Mabel had been able to fill it for the time, but now they were gone it came back with overpowering force. There was no excitement now in driving or dining with the squire, and she thirsted for excitement and emotion; for something to raise her out of the dead level of her uneventful life.

What could there be but weariness for her in the society of an old man, however rich and generous he might be? It was not fine raiment or jewels, or dainty fare, or luxury for which she hungered, but love; and nothing else would satisfy her.

It would be idle to pretend that she did not understand the drift of Sir Bertram's attentions. Edith and Mabel would not permit her to remain in doubt on that head—it was indeed rather flattering to her girlish vanity to think of having an offer from a baronet, and she did not seriously realize the enormity she would be committing in treating the pretensions of so august a personage as she might have done those of a clerk or a curate. To marry an old man! the idea only seemed laughable, and had not got so far even as to be repugnant. And the squire, who was wise in his generation, had never trenched upon anything lover-like, but had contented himself with being friendly and courteous.

A sense of weariness and depression settled upon Vanessa after the departure of her friends; she took long rambles in solitary parts of Sir Bertram's woods, where she gave herself over to reverie, and vented her sadness in long-drawn sighs. Sometimes tears came into her lovely eyes and stole down her cheeks. Her sighs and tears were for John Brandon; the fruit half of longing, half of remorse. She wanted to love; she could have loved him—nay, she did. If he would only come back once more, how differently she would behave to him from the last time they met! She blushed when she remembered her cool, strange behavior and his mystified, disappointed look. Of course he would never come near her again. Oh! if he did come, what a welcome would she give him!

A week elapsed, and the squire decided that the time had arrived to settle matters, and to make arrangements for his forthcoming marriage. In two months' time the vicar's daughter should be Lady Orford. As soon as all was settled, he would have milliners and dressmakers down from London to prepare her future ladyship's *trousseau*; he had no idea of exhibiting her to the world or of letting her see it until the church had turned the key in the lock of the casket and handed it over to him.

As a little matter of form, he intended to make the flattering announcement of his intentions to the vicar first, and then to the blushing, trembling maid herself.

To understand Sir Bertram's confidence in the fulfillment of his desires, one would almost be compelled to enter into his autocratic mind and look down from that exalted position at the humble persons he was condescending to honor.

Having decided upon the day and hour when he would make known his resolve, he sent a note to the vicar announcing that he would call at four o'clock in the afternoon, and the vicar was accordingly waiting in the drawing-room to receive him, utterly unsuspecting the honor about to be thrust upon him. A man with ordinary shrewdness might have gathered some idea of the meaning of the sudden *rapprochement* between the Hall and the Vicarage; but Ivan Wentworth had only one idea in the world, and that was fixed on the great work he one day hoped to give mankind. He did not realize that he had a lovely, marriageable daughter, or that any one was plotting to change the course of life at the Vicarage; if he had thought at all about the matter, he would have admitted that it was reasonable to suppose a man might love and want to marry Vanessa, but he did not think about it, or indeed anything else except the darling of his brain. His attention, now and then dragged forcibly off it by his clerical duties, flew back like a spring the moment it was released.

So, lost in reverie, he awaits the squire's visit without the faintest curiosity as to its object.

The great man comes in with a smile on his lips and a pleasing air of condescension. He is about to confer an honor on this humble abode, and is prepared to do it in a princely and ungrudging spirit.

"You, no doubt, conjecture something of the object of my visit," he begins, as soon as he and the vicar are seated, and then he pauses to give his chosen father-in-law an opportunity of looking gratified and conscious.

The vicar racks his brain for a moment; that absorbed brain which so often plays the traitor to him by running away from the every-day things that ought to occupy it. Is it something about the parish or the church, or some subject previously discussed between them?

"I confess," he says, a little confusedly, "that just at this moment I do not quite call to mind——"

Sir Bertram interrupts him, not very well pleased at his evident unconsciousness of the purport of his visit. But he tries to retain his smiling and urbane demeanor.

"Then I must explain myself. You have not, I am sure, failed to observe what an impression your daughter has made upon me since my return to the Hall: She is a beautiful and charming girl, and, I doubt not, as amiable as she is beautiful—in fact, she is quite fitted to adorn any station."

The vicar's mind has by this time completely torn itself away from the great work and is centered on the squire's oration. It does not, however, receive quite the correct impression, but as-

sumes that his visitor may have conceived the intention of adopting Vanessa.

"She is a very good girl," he replies, "and—and, yes, I suppose she is handsome."

"There are few more beautiful women in England," returns Sir Bertram, feeling already something of the pride of possession, "and when surrounded by the *apanages* of rank and wealth, it will be difficult, I fancy, to find one to compare with her."

"She has not had the advantages that I could have wished for her," says the vicar, feeling a shade remorseful at not having tried to do more for her in the way of accomplishments.

"She is perfectly well-informed," replies the squire, affably, "and she sings charmingly. No doubt she would easily acquire French, which it is important for a woman of fashion to be conversant with—every advantage would be at her disposal."

The vicar is still further confirmed in his idea of Sir Bertram's intentions.

"You would, I think," pursues the squire, with magnificent patronage, "be able to intrust her to me with a feeling of perfect security as to her happiness and well-being."

Ivan Wentworth is a simple-minded gentleman, who has lived for many years in great retirement, knowing and thinking very little about men and manners. To him Sir Bertram is only a respectable old gentleman, the grandfather of his daughter's playmates—a man long past the time when men may be expected to think of young women in any but a paternal manner. No rumors of Sir Bertram's *liaisons*, of his mode of life in cities, have ever penetrated here; that the old man would fain be wooing and love-making does not occur to him.

"Am I to understand, Sir Bertram," he asks, simply, "that you are expressing a wish to adopt my daughter?"

A dull red creeps into the squire's dry, brown cheek, and a gleam of anger lights his cold eyes. In his heart he savagely curses the vicar for a blind fool of a book-worm. It is by a very strong effort of will that he still smiles as he says:

"If you like to express it in that form," he replies. "I propose to adopt her by making her Lady Orford."

At these words a strange transformation comes over the vicar's face. It is one by no means flattering to Sir Bertram. He looks shocked, appalled, and, for the moment, is quite bereft of speech. His brain is perfectly clear now, and he is conscious of the full horror of the thought of uniting a lovely, blooming child to a cold, ungenial old man like the one before him.

"You seem surprised," remarks the squire, in tones that all his self-control cannot prevent from being harsh.

"I am indeed," almost gasps the vicar.

Sir Bertram feels his anger growing. He rises.

"I see Miss Wentworth in the garden," he says. "I will go and talk to her whilst you accustom yourself to the idea."

The vicar does not attempt to detain him, but sits buried in thought whilst the squire marches out and down the gravel path

to join Vanessa, who is just making her way to her favorite rose bower.

Ivan Wentworth is the most unworldly of men—rank, wealth, luxury, fashion, possess no charm in his eyes. He has never had any ambition beyond that of being a scholar. Nor does it occur to him that Vanessa is likely to have any aspirations after the world's pleasures. She knows nothing of them. How can she covet what she has never seen? He regrets having allowed Sir Bertram to go in quest of her. She will be shocked and terrified at his proposal—perhaps he ought to join them, and relieve her of the embarrassment she must be suffering. But the vicar is the most irresolute of men, and, in the end, he takes his hat, and walks off in another direction, leaving Vanessa to her fate. He had omitted to mention the squire's intended visit to her, so that she is ignorant with what importance his call to-day is fraught.

When Sir Bertram joins her, she receives him in her wonted pretty, smiling manner, and he is reassured, and doubts not that his suit will be welcome to the daughter, although the father has taken it in so singular and unbecoming a fashion.

"I am glad to find you here," he begins, with some meaning in his tone. "You were expecting me?"

"No," Vanessa answers, simply. Then, wishing to be polite, she continues: "But I am very glad to see you."

Sir Bertram is not inclined to beat about the bush.

"Are you?" he says, and takes her hand.

With that all the blood seems to recede from Vanessa's heart and a feeling of the most horrible repulsion rushes through her frame. She longs to drag her hand from his clasp, but is half afraid of him; half afraid, besides, of wounding him. She knows that the moment has come. In theory, the squire's offer had been all very well. She had never dreamed how terrible and hateful the reality would be. He has put off his paternal manner, and she finds the change revolting.

He retains his hold of her hand, although she is white and trembling; but these signs of fear and modesty are pleasing to him—he does not understand their real significance.

"You have guessed all along, I am sure," he goes on, "the feelings that you have inspired in me. I only wonder how I can have remained blind to all your beauties and charms so long."

He draws nearer to her. Vanessa holds her breath—an almost irresistible impulse seizes her to spring up and rush away into the house; to lock herself in her room away from him—she, however, masters it.

"You are very kind," she utters, in a constrained voice, drawing her hand and herself further from him.

Although Sir Bertram does not expect to win any real love from a woman, he yet thinks himself entitled to a certain amount of simulated affection, and the cold embarrassment of the girl's voice does not quite please him. He, however, takes the hint, and begins to treat the matter from its commercial point of view.

"It is unfair to the world," he says, "to deprive it of so beautiful a creature as you; I wish to be the means of bringing you into it, and of introducing you to all its pleasures and enjoyments. I shall be able to deny you nothing—as my wife, as Lady Orford, you shall have advantages that will make other women envious of you, and you will not, I hope, find me too exacting in return."

Vanessa turns hot and cold as he speaks. She is realizing that it will be a very serious thing to refuse the squire. His words, although they contain promises of all the things she has most desired, save one, do not tempt her; if he could give her ten times as much, it would not weigh with her against the horror he inspires in her as would-be lover and husband—if he were a duke she could not overcome her violent repugnance for the sake of being his duchess. So long as he had been kind and paternal, she had never guessed that she could feel such sickening disgust of him.

"I—I am very much honored by—by your kindness, Sir Bertram," she says, stumbly, "but—but I hope you will not be displeased or offended. You have been very good to me, but—but it would be quite impossible for me to think of you in—in that sort of way."

Sir Bertram does not yet realize that he is going to be made a fool of.

"Do not be alarmed," he says, almost gently, so bent on owning this lovely girl that he is content even to brook delay—"marriage, we know, is a serious consideration for a young lady. Take time to accustom yourself to the idea—give me opportunities of proving my devotion to you—let us not decide anything just for the present."

A dreadful feeling comes over Vanessa that he is trying to entangle her into a sort of consent to his suit, and she resolves to free herself once for all whilst there is yet time.

"I could never, *never*," she cries, with great energy, "think of you in any other way than as a friend."

Sir Bertram is unmistakably *froisse* by these words.

"I hope," he utters, in a hard voice, "that you do not intend me to take this quite seriously."

"Indeed, indeed I do," she answers, almost excitedly.

"Do you mean to say," asks Sir Bertram, in a harsh, uncompromising tone, "that, up to this moment, you have been ignorant of the meaning of my attentions to you?"

Vanessa hangs her head in silence, feeling terribly ashamed and conscious.

"Was the possibility of my proposing to marry you never mooted between you and—and Edith and Mabel?"

His voice and manner are those of a stern judge. Vanessa feels like some wretched, unhappy culprit.

"Am I to understand," pursues the squire, growing still more awful, "that you thought it a jest to encourage the passion of a man of my age and position? If so, let me tell you, young lady, that by such conduct you not only disgrace your sex, but

that you will find you have placed yourself in a very unpleasant situation."

Vanessa has a fine spirit of her own, and Sir Bertram's threatening tone rouses it.

"You could hardly," she says, raising her head with a proud air, "expect me to refuse an offer before it was made, and I should have thought that my being no older than your own granddaughters would have protected me from any such ideas on your part. You could not have thought," indignantly, "that a girl of eighteen could love a man of your age; and if you thought I would marry you without loving you, you must have had a very bad opinion of me."

The squire sits biting his lips with mortification, and yet, in spite of himself, he cannot help admiring her more than ever for her show of spirit. She has never looked so handsome. But after such a decided expression of her sentiments, he feels there is nothing more to be said—it only remains for him to take his leave with as much dignity as he can summon.

Sir Bertram rises, stiffens his back, erects his head, and says in a voice as though his sentences were forced out by a spring:

"It is unfortunate I should have been so mistaken. I bid you good day."

Vanessa follows his retreating figure with frightened eyes—she feels that she has committed the crime of *lese-majeste*, and the wrath of the autocrat is very terrible. This is no longer the smiling, affable old gentleman with whom she has been wont to play of late, but the squire with all his old terrors augmented. She waits for a few moments with bated breath until she thinks he must be clear of the house; then she flies to her room, locks the door, and gives vent to her feelings by a burst of tears.

Meanwhile Sir Bertram, bitter beyond all expression of words, passes through the Vicarage gate on his way home. As he emerges, he sees to his left at some little distance two men walking, engaged in earnest conversation. One is leading a horse, and in him the squire recognizes the hated form of Brandon. He strides away, fury added to bitterness; unmindful of the heat, he walks at racing speed up the drive to the Hall and into his study, where he gives vent to a very effective string of curses and imprecations, although there is no one present to be annihilated by them. He begins to realize how sore his disappointment is, and how much he had counted on the possession of the vicar's lovely daughter. He is angrily surprised now to think that he should have felt so certain of her: that he had not prepared himself against such a possibility. But who could dream of so humble an individual declining such honor? if he were willing to confer, who could imagine that she would refuse?

He had made his plans for the autumn and winter—they were to be spent abroad in company with his beautiful young wife; and he had dwelt with considerable pleasure on the coming change in his life. Now everything was disarranged; where anticipation had reigned, disappointment, blank dullness stood instead—he was only a lonely old man, and no longer an eager, expectant bridegroom.

He cursed the girl who had humiliated him in no measured terms; he longed to be revenged on her—he would give a very large sum of money at this moment to do her some mortal injury and disgrace. The thought of Brandon lent fuel to the flames. Why was he here? what was the topic that so deeply engrossed him and the vicar? He, no doubt was the favored rival. Then the squire cursed the vicar for not telling him that his daughter already had a suitor, and thus saving him the mortification of a refusal. Anon he lashed himself into fresh fury by thinking that father and daughter had conspired to deceive him into making the offer, that they might have the glory of boasting how they had befooled him; in his anger, he was ready to impute the most improbable thoughts and motives to every one. Brandon, curse him! was gloating over his discomfiture, and would spread the story in London of how he had been duped by an insignificant hussy. He wished him joy of her. No doubt one of these days his turn would come, and then they would see whom the laugh was against.

And the angry, disappointed man worked himself into such a paroxysm of fury that unable to command his voice or features, he remained locked in his room for hours, unmindful of dinner or of arousing the servants' suspicions, or of anything save his own wrath and spite.

CHAPTER IX.

BRANDON has tried to forget Vanessa; has even been abroad in search of distraction. In vain. She has taken root in his heart, and though he may chide his folly for hankering after the fair maiden who, he tells himself, is too young, too beautiful, and altogether too good for him, he cannot banish her from his thoughts. At all events, he will see her once more. Why should he not be her friend if he cannot be her lover? So he has come off suddenly; on the spur of the moment, to assure himself whether she is as lovely as he thinks her, and perhaps, though he does not admit it even to himself, to see if his case is quite hopeless.

When he is within two hundred yards of the Vicarage, he espies his friend rapidly approaching. As the vicar recognizes Brandon, a lock of intense relief and pleasure comes into his face.

"My dear fellow," he says, grasping the other's hand, "how glad I am you are here! I was never so pleased to see any one in my life. I am in a most curious dilemma; I fear I have not done the right thing. Pray advise me!"

Therewith Brandon dismounts, having a shrewd suspicion that the beautiful daughter is in someway connected with the vicar's perplexity.

"The squire has just been with me," proceeds Mr. Wentworth; "he came to ask me for my daughter in marriage. It is monstrous, horrible! He is with her now. Poor child! I feel that I ought not to have allowed him to speak to her on the sub-

ject. She will be shocked, horrified; but he is a resolute, imperious man. In my surprise I knew not how to act."

A deep flush comes over Brandon's face as the vicar speaks. It is not that he is surprised at the intelligence; it is because he has a dreadful misgiving that Vanessa may look upon the squire's proposal in a different light from her father, and that she may be tempted to exchange her dull life here for some of the world's pomps and pleasures, even though the enjoyment of them be coupled with so odious a condition as Sir Bertram himself.

"Do you think," he asks, in a low, nervous tone, "that Miss Wentworth will be quite unprepared for Sir Bertram's proposal?"

The vicar stares at him.

"I am not surprised," Brandon goes on. "You, my dear Ivan, are so engrossed with your book that you do not take much notice of what is going on about you; but when I was here before, I perceived plainly Sir Bertram's feelings for your daughter and quite expected this *denouement*. And I think you will find that Miss Wentworth was not without her suspicions."

"You seem to forget," cries the vicar, aghast, "that he is an old man, that her playmates and companions are his *grand-daughters*."

"I live in the world," replies Brandon, "and see such marriages every day; at all events with some frequency. There is no incongruity in society's eyes when the man is as rich as Sir Bertram and occupies such a position. I only wonder your suspicions were not aroused sooner."

"How should they have been aroused?" cries the vicar, almost indignantly.

"Why, surely, if it is only during the last two months that Sir Bertram has sought your society and that of your daughter, and if his whole demeanor has changed toward you since then, you might have attributed it to some new state of feeling on his part. I only hope," and Brandon's voice trembles in spite of him, "that Miss Wentworth will not give a favorable ear to his suit, for I confess there is something very revolting in the idea of a lovely young girl being given a prey to a——"

It is at this moment that the squire emerges from the vicarage gate, marching in hot haste toward his own park.

"He does not look like an accepted suitor," cries Brandon, breaking off his former sentence and looking intensely relieved. "Well, I will go and put my horse up whilst you hear the result of the interview from Miss Wentworth."

Vanessa is still sobbing when Susan taps at her door. She makes no answer at first, then Susan, having tried the handle in vain, repeats her summons.

"Miss Nessa, my dear, let me in," she entreats, in a cajoling whisper, through the keyhole.

"What do you want?" cries Vanessa, throwing open the door and looking rather an angry divinity with her flushed face, knitted brows, and streaming eyes.

Susan looks a little awe-struck as well as mysterious.

"Your pa is asking for you, and Mr. Brandon's come," she says, still in a whisper.

At this, the pucker leaves Vanessa's brow; a wave of beautiful color overspreads her cheeks, and a sudden thrill of gladness goes to her heart.

"My dear," murmurs Susan, going up and laying her hand on the girl's arm, "you've never bin and refused the squire, have you?"

"What!" cries Vanessa, sharply, "would you have me marry an old man like that?"

"No, no, my dear, of course not!" returns Susan, soothingly. "Only it seems such an awful thing to refuse a great gentleman like him. Why, whatever did he say?"

"Where is Mr. Brandon?" asks Vanessa, not answering her, but going to the glass to see what ravages her tears have made in her appearance. "Get me out a clean frock." And she proceeds vigorously to bathe her eyes and cheeks, whilst Susan, with feminine intuition, gets out her young lady's best and most becoming dress. She, however, makes the mistake of laying out the squire's locket.

"Put that horrid thing away, and never let me see it again!" cries her young mistress, imperiously.

She is standing before the glass, twisting up her beautiful locks with fingers trembling with impatience. She is in a great hurry to see Brandon again.

By the time her toilet is finished he has returned to the Vicarage.

"Well?" he exclaims, hurriedly, as he enters the room and finds his friend alone; but the vicar has not yet had audience of his daughter. Presently she comes in, and greets Brandon with a serene and smiling face. But, eying her narrowly, he detects traces of tears in the slightly swollen appearance of her broad eyelids. It is obvious that no explanations can take place now, and the vicar, glad of the excuse of shirking anything unpleasant, leaves them presently to wander in the garden together, and goes to have an hour with his beloved book.

Brandon is devoured by curiosity. Although he is, as a rule, the least inquisitive of men, and the most delicately sensitive about seeming intrusive or impertinent, he knows not on this occasion how to control his eagerness to hear what answer Vanessa has given the squire—whether she has refused him at all, refused him conditionally, or allowed him room to hope? He is so preoccupied that, as he walks beside her, he is silent, unable to speak on any subject but the one that so engrosses him. She is employing various little coquetries to overcome his gravity and silence, but he is absorbed in fighting with his imperative desire to question her. It ends by mastering him.

"Well!" he says, quite suddenly and abruptly, devouring her with his eyes, "am I to congratulate you?"

She gives a little start, and looks extremely confused.

"What do you mean?" she stammers, though of course she knows quite well.

"Are you to be Lady Orford?" he asks, quite unconscious how harsh and inquisitorial his tone is.

"Why should you think so?" she says, her feminine nature asserting itself sufficiently to make her rather pleased at this exhibition of anxiety and jealousy on his part.

Brandon is too eager to know the truth to waste time in beating about the bush.

"Your father told me that Sir Bertram had proposed to him for you," he replies.

"And what did papa say?" Vanessa asks.

"He said it was a horrid, monstrous thought!" cries Brandon. "And so I say."

"Did he tell Sir Bertram that?" inquires Vanessa.

"He ought to have done so," answers Brandon, warmly. "But he was too utterly taken by surprise. 'But,' breaking off, 'for Heaven's sake, tell me what *you* said. That is the point.'"

"What do you think I should say?" utters Vanessa, affecting indignation.

"I think you would say 'No,' he answers, vehemently. "I think you would feel insulted and degraded by such a proposal."

"Degraded?" echoes Vanessa, proudly.

"No, no, pardon me—I ought not to have used such a word. It is natural that every man, young or old, should love you," he continues, in a melancholy voice—"a man's sense of his own unfitness cannot, unfortunately, prevent his falling in love."

"I am very sorry," says Vanessa, in a penitent tone. "But I think he ought to have known it was ridiculous. I was his granddaughter's playfellow."

Brandon looks earnestly at her.

"Still," he utters, "you were not entirely without suspicion of what was passing in his mind, were you? When he changed from a 'horrid old monster' to 'quite a dear,' you had some little inkling as to the cause of the transformation?"

Vanessa turns her face from him, and stops to pluck a rosebud. He seems to be waiting for her answer.

"One would be very conceited," she says, carefully avoiding his glance, "if one thought because—because any one was kind to one, that he wanted to marry one."

"A woman always knows when a man is in earnest," remarks Brandon, continuing his eager scrutiny of her face; "she may think sometimes that he is when he is not, but she cannot mistake the symptoms when he is."

"I have had no experience," murmurs Vanessa.

"I saw it when I was here before," pursues Brandon. "Sir Bertram deigned to be jealous of my enjoying your society. Tell me," suddenly, "what did he say to you that day to alter all your manner to me?"

The scarlet flames into Vanessa's cheeks—she would rather die than confess the ignominious doubts of which she has been so bitterly ashamed ever since. Seeing her confusion, Brandon becomes more eager still, and repeats his question.

"Tell me," he entreats—"tell me; I shall not mind: only tell me!"

"No, no, there is nothing to tell," answers Vanessa, almost vehemently, as if she feared her secret being dragged from her by main force; "indeed there is not."

"But before he came," utters Brandon, "you were quite easy and natural in your manner to me. You seemed, if I may be vain enough to say so, quite contented in my society—and after you had been talking with Sir Bertram, you changed entirely, and were cold and constrained. I might almost have imagined he had been telling you some dreadful story to my disadvantage, only that" (with a frank laugh) "my conscience is quite clear."

"I cannot think why you should fancy anything of the sort," says Vanessa.

"Ah, but there was something," he persists. "However, I must not press you, if you will not tell me of your own free will. But confess that it was natural I should think his influence over you must be considerable to make you change so suddenly."

Vanessa shakes her head. She is determined not to admit anything.

"After all," pursues Brandon, "though he is an old man, Sir Bertram has a great deal to offer you, and I am quite sure there never was a woman who would enjoy the world's pleasures more than you. Do you mean to go on living here forever in this simple Arcadian style, and do you think it will always satisfy you?"

"It does not satisfy me," answers Vanessa, with a deep and genuine sigh.

"You seemed quite happy the first time I saw you," says Brandon.

"Yes," murmurs Vanessa, and sighs again.

"Then what has changed you?"

"I do not know," she replies vaguely. "Edith and Mabel have been here, and they have told me all about their life in London. Perhaps it is that."

She cannot tell him that it is he who has had the largest share in making her dissatisfied with her life—that it is he who has turned dreams into possible realities, and awakened in her a longing to love and be beloved.

There is a pensive, yearning expression in her eyes, as though afar off she sees the goal of her desires. Every moment that Brandon is in her presence he is falling more deeply in love. He longs to speak, to tell her something of what is in his heart; but suppose she should treat his pretensions as she has done the squire's! And the old sense of its being unfair to take advantage of her ignorance of the world and of men comes back to him with renewed force.

Vanessa is in a mood when she would like him to speak; the repulsion which Sir Bertram inspired in her has reacted to Brandon's advantage, but he is not to know this.

With an effort he changes his tone, and says, lightly:

"I suppose your friends had a great deal to tell you about the

delights of their first season. I met them once; they are pretty, unaffected girls,—the younger one seemed full of life and spirits.”

“Yes,” Vanessa answers, “Mab is very bright.”

“You have not forgotten, I hope,” observes Brandon, “that you promised to come and pay me a visit, and see for yourself what London is like.”

“I thought *you* had forgotten,” and there is a shade of reproach in Vanessa’s voice.

“I am not very likely to forget,” he says. “But you would not thank me for asking you in August, when there is no one and nothing to be seen.”

“I dare say it would seem very gay to me. I should not know the difference. They do not shut the shops, I suppose, and there must always be thousands of people about in a large city.”

“Not the sort of people you would care to see or mix with,” smiles Brandon.

“But I should not know them, so it would make no difference. I should like,” with a gesture significant of weariness, “to get away from here for a little, and to see something else.”

“The country is just at its best now,” says Brandon, “and London at its worst. Would you exchange your lovely flowers and this fresh, beautiful air for a stifling atmosphere and glaring pavements and hot rooms?”

“I think it would be a delightful change,” and Vanessa smiles. “One gets tired of the same thing when it goes on forever and ever.”

“At all events,” says Brandon, “you shall try. Wait until next month, and I will do my very best to make London agreeable to you.”

All her face lights up with pleasure.

“Change!” muses Brandon to himself, as, later, he walks toward the village inn. “Change! That is human nature, I suppose; never to be satisfied with the same thing long.”

He is to partake of high tea at the Vicarage, and to-morrow, at his friend’s earnest request, he has promised to come over and spend a couple of days with them. It is very dangerous to his own peace of mind, he knows; doubtless he will suffer severely for it later, but at the present moment the greatest happiness he knows, or cares for, is to be at Vanessa’s side, and he flings prudence to the winds as recklessly as though he were twenty years younger.

The vicar, seeing his daughter coming up the garden alone, joins her. He is considerably embarrassed as to how he shall approach the delicate subject of the squire.

“You saw Sir Bertram, I suppose?” he says, quite confused and almost blushing.

“Yes, papa,” Vanessa answers, rather coldly.

“I am afraid”—hesitatingly—“it must have been rather—rather painful for you.”

“Why did you let him speak to me, papa?” says Vanessa, affecting a lightly injured air.

“I was so surprised—so confounded,” replies the vicar, apolo-

getically. "And he gave me no time for reflection or consideration."

"He is old enough to be my grandfather," continues Vanessa.

"Exactly so," agrees her father. "I cannot imagine how he could ever have entertained such an idea. And yet, it was difficult to represent that to a man of his age. One is reluctant to hurt his feelings. I hope"—anxiously—"you expressed yourself as kindly as possible. It will, no doubt, be humiliating to him to reflect upon having committed a foolish action."

"I have no doubt he will be our enemy for life," remarks Vanessa, whose mind is much more practical than her father's.

This suggestion disconcerts the vicar so greatly that he repeats it to himself two or three times, and then falls into a reverie, of which Vanessa takes advantage to leave him, and repair to her room to embellish herself for the evening meal.

Brandon, on his return, finds the vicar alone.

"I have not been able to elicit much from my daughter," he says, attacking the subject at once. "Except, of course, that she was very naturally shocked and surprised. She seems to think"—hesitatingly—"that her refusal will make an enemy of the squire: but surely, surely no man would be so unreasonable as to entertain ill feeling to people who have so innocently and unwillingly offended him?"

"A man is always angry with any one who shows him that he has made a fool of himself," remarks Brandon. "I am afraid there are a great many fools about. Look here, Ivan"—suddenly—"I suppose it has never entered your brain that I am in love with your daughter?"

"You!" stammers the vicar, showing plainly by voice and manner that this, too, is a revelation to him.

"Yes," says Brandon, steadily; "and so, probably, would nine men out of every ten be who saw her. And, I suppose," speaking with effort, but looking his friend full in the face, "you are only one degree less shocked than you were by Sir Bertram's declaration; for, if he is old enough to be her grandfather, I am old enough to be her father—you and I are nearly the same age, Ivan."

"You seem quite a young man compared with me," says the vicar; "but I confess all this sudden talk of love and marriage confuses my brain—I know not what to think or say."

"That is because your brain is so occupied with one subject that you can see and think of nothing else," returns Brandon. "But, my dear Ivan, you *ought* to think about your daughter's future. Is not the fate of a beautiful young girl, your own flesh and blood, of more importance than a book?"

"Yes, yes—of course, of course," assents the vicar, looking a little bit ashamed of himself. "I had not realized that she was grown up. But have you spoken to her?—does she know anything of—of your feelings?"

"I cannot tell," answers Brandon, looking away. "I do not feel that it would be fair to try to win her affections until she has seen other, younger men. But," suddenly, "if it were possible

—if I could make her care for me, should you object to me as a husband for her, either on the score of my age or any other account?"

"No, no," answers the vicar, warmly—"you are the greatest friend I ever had. If you can win her affection, I should be glad and happy. Only that," musingly, "the idea is so new and strange to me altogether, I scarcely seem able to grasp it."

As Brandon rides away that evening, he is torn in two by his desires and his conscience. Shall he speak to-morrow, or shall he forbear? What a look she gave him from those lovely eyes at parting! Did she know how much it said? His heart thrills with rapture at the thought of possessing her. But what if, later, she should repent, and know that she had thrown herself away? There are some temptations, however, that are too strong for a man.

CHAPTER X.

IN the moonlit night, Brandon and Vanessa are standing by the gate leading into the meadow. The cows are taking their rest—long ago the birds have ceased their songs; a hush has fallen on the night—there is only the gentle rustle of whispering leaves to break the silence. The moon makes a mirror of yon water-pool; anon a breath of wind shivers it into a hundred shining fragments—the breeze goes by, and the pool is again a silver mirror.

The swift and strong emotions that are hurrying through Brandon's heart give a troubled look to his face: doubt, desire, honorable scruples, irresistible longing. Vanessa is smiling, serene, unruffled; if her heart beats a shade quicker than its wont, her face gives no evidence of it.

She looks at the cows and the water-pool—he looks at her, and suddenly resolves to speak. His voice sounds strange to his own ears as well as to hers—the strangled emotion; the tremulousness of it makes her turn involuntarily to look at him.

"I dare not speak," he says, "and yet I cannot be silent. Tell me what to do!"

His tone is imploring, as though he would say, "Put me out of my misery at once!" She smiled shyly, perhaps, but certainly invitingly. So Brandon goes on impetuously:

"You are so beautiful, and I love you so devotedly, and yet I feel as if I were committing almost a crime in asking you to marry me, because you are so much too young and too lovely—too altogether above and beyond me."

Vanessa, like most of her sex, is pleased to be treated as a goddess. She smiles encouragingly at him: with her eloquent eyes she benevolently bids him not despair. Then he approaches a little nearer and takes her hand; his reverence still mastering his passion.

"I would give all I have to make you mine," he says, "and yet I know I am taking an unfair advantage of you. Perhaps you fancy that you like me a little—do you?" breaking off

passionately—"tell me: do you care for me just the least bit in the world? I am not repulsive to you? you do not shrink from me?"

And, as though to test what she can endure from him, he bends forward and touches her lips with his. She trembles and draws back a little, but it is from emotion and modesty, not from disgust, and he knows the difference.

"My darling!" he murmurs, and then he releases her and leans for a moment against the gate, trying to still his beating pulses. She is looking away from him to hide her crimson blushes.

But Brandon's troublesome conscience will not allow him to take with a thankful heart and outstretched hands what the gods have sent.

"I won't ask you to marry me yet," he says; "you *must* see other men first—you *must* be sure of yourself first. In six months' time—after you have been to London, you shall decide."

Vanessa feels a shade disappointed—no woman can ever understand or feel flattered by a man giving her up, or offering to give her up for her own sake.

"Why should you think I do not know my own mind?" she says, in a low voice, looking for a moment into his face, and then away beyond him.

"Because, my sweet," he answers, catching her hand, "if it would be heaven to me to have you, it would be worse than hell after you were mine to think you regretted it or that some other man might have made you happier."

"But I am sure," she says, with a pretty air of conviction, "that no other man *would* make me happier." And she turns a look upon him that bereaves him of judgment, and conscience, and everything except love.

After that he throws prudence to the wind—if a voice within him tries to speak, he strangles it with passionate fury. He abandons the idea of taking his bride-elect to London—he refuses to entertain the thought of a six months' courtship—he is in terror of his life lest, between this and his marriage-day, she shall see some younger, better-favored man—he scans the little village congregation to discover whether among it there is any good-looking yeoman, who might please a woman's eye. He gives specious reasons for hastening the wedding—he wants to take his wife abroad before the fine weather goes—he must be settled in town again by the middle of October.

Susan is the person who demurs most at the haste—she thinks of the "trusso" which she would fain confection with her own diligent fingers. Vanessa is dazzled by the pictures her lover draws her of the sights to be seen—most of all by the thought of Paris; and the vicar, a little bewildered and perplexed, is still rather thankful at having a responsibility taken off his hands to the seriousness of which he has only just been made alive.

Brandon, like all generous men, is looking forward to lavishing presents and beautiful things on his loved one; he, therefore, knowing the vicar's purse to be slender, undertakes the

ordering of a moderate trousseau, and has the bill so cleverly manipulated that it is not until Vanessa has learned by practical experience the costliness of feminine attire that she guesses the deception which has been practiced upon them. If ever a man had reason to believe that he was going to be married for love's sake, Brandon has. He is Vanessa's first love; she heaps upon him all that adoration with which her ripening woman's heart is overflowing. Were he a thousand Romeos and Adonises in one, he could not be more pleasing in her eyes. She was thirsting for love—she loves, and is supremely blessed.

And Brandon, if he is more of a straightforward, matter-of-fact English gentleman than of a romantic and idealistic lover, has refined and delicate instincts which prevent him from jarring the susceptibilities of an innocent and inexperienced young maiden, whilst his passionate love forbids her ever to feel the disappointment which an exacting woman sometimes suffers in a lover considerably older than herself.

Vanessa turns away from the altar on her wedding-day beaming with smiles; as for Brandon, his happiness almost oppresses him.

Theirs was a honeymoon of the real old-fashioned sort, all smiles, and love, and fair weather; there were no *desillusions*, no bitter awakenings and passionate disappointments. The bridegroom did not find the bride an exacting woman of whom he began to realize the possibility of growing weary; the bride did not discover that the bridegroom was but a selfish man and would-be tyrant who had only assumed a chivalrous and worshipping demeanor until he obtained what he served for. They adored each other; they were surrounded by the loveliest scenes; everything was new and enchanting to Vanessa. She was not capricious, but delighted with everything, grateful for everything—a beautiful, happy, satisfied woman. She showed her love in her expressive eyes, by a thousand fascinating little gestures; without knowing it, she took all the world into her confidence as to her feelings for Brandon, and we may imagine whether this was bliss to a man who adored, but who yet felt himself too old for and all unworthy of such an exquisite creature. At this time, every curled darling in the Household Brigade might have tried his blandishments on Mrs. Brandon and only encountered defeat and failure; there existed but one man for her; all the rest were simple units going to make up the great world.

So Vanessa was happy beyond the happiness meted out to common mortals—to indemnify her perhaps for, or to make more bitter, the anguish and despair that the future held in store for her.

Why do we suffer? Why do we rejoice? Why are we everlastingly going up or down in the balances of joy and misery? Nothing is as good as it seems, nor yet anything so bad. We are crushed with misery, we give up; life is a burden too grievous to be borne, and then some little, sudden, unexpected gleam of hope or pleasure comes to us and gives us power to struggle on. Or we are triumphant, radiant, a great piece of good fort-

une is ours. After all, the world is a very pleasant place; and hey, presto, a horde of petty cares and vexations creeps in, and steals away the honey from our flower. How *can* we live on and smile and weave projects when in an hour's time we may be lying stone dead, or shipwrecked in hope and heart—nay, much more, when beyond the grave there stretches that awful uncertainty?

But Brandon and Vanessa were supremely happy. The most morbid and dyspeptic wretch would not have dared to air his pessimist ideas in presence of their bliss; he would have crept away and howled in anguish at such a living refutation of his theory of universal misery, even though he took comfort in the knowledge that their time would also come.

The middle of October saw Mr. and Mrs. Brandon installed in their comfortable, old-fashioned, roomy house in Bryanston Square. It had been left to Brandon by a spinster aunt some seven years before, and he had lived there ever since, and saw no reason for changing his habitation now. Had he married a fashionable woman, she would probably have "tip-tilted" her nose at it, and insisted on exchanging it for a bijou residence in a more desirable quarter, but Vanessa, who was quite ignorant of locality in London, and had everything to learn, thought it a palace, and was delighted with it. After a fortnight spent in Paris, her raptures about London were naturally modified, though the idea of shops and theaters still presented enormous attractions to her. When she had been a week in her new house, she was surprised and horrified to find the time beginning to hang heavy on her hands—to feel a sense of weariness and listlessness and a depression of spirits such as she had never known before. It was easily to be accounted for, though she was not experienced enough to trace the cause of her malady, or rather *malaise*. It was reaction—the penalty demanded for having been too happy. For six weeks she had lived in a whirl of pleasure and excitement, among new scenes and almost cloudless skies—most of all, she had been blest with the constant presence of the man she loved. Now he was away the greater part of the day, and she had to spend her time quite alone in his absence. She was accustomed almost to live in the air, to run out bareheaded into a garden fifty times a day, and now she could not even walk out, because there was no one to accompany her, and driving about in a brougham was rather dull work, as she had not yet learned, nor had the opportunity, to distract herself with shopping and visiting. Added to this, there were already fogs, and the atmosphere was gray and murky. She could not settle to anything.

She played the piano a little, read a little, looked out of the window a great deal, and yawned a great deal. There were no domestic cares to occupy her. Mr. Brandon had an admirable housekeeper, who still held the reins of government to the general benefit of every one. Vanessa had nothing to do but to amuse herself, and a very severe task she found it. She had not at present a friend of either sex. Edith and Mabel happened to

be in London, but they were not allowed to see or speak to her. Edith had written to her.

"MY DARLING NESSA,—I am so grieved that, though we are passing through London, I dare not see you. Grandpapa has forbidden us to hold any intercourse with you under the most awful penalties. Of course we guess what happened, though you may be sure he did not tell us. I should have flown to see you at once, but mamma would not allow it, as she said it might ruin our prospects if he found it out. What a shame it is one can't be happy one's own way in this world! I don't think it's much of a place, after all. They have been worrying me to marry *him*—the man I told you about—but I *won't*. I would rather die! I am not like Mab. Sir Thomas Belton paid her a great deal of attention at a house where we were staying last week, and she swears she will have him if he proposes. He is fifty, and very plain, and one of his front teeth is *black*! She calls him her black pearl. You'll think me very selfish talking so much about ourselves. I suppose you are awfully happy, having married a man you are so fond of. How I envy you! I thought Mr. Brandon so *very* nice the only time I met him! I can't tell you how grieved I am not to be able to see you. If I am ever independent, you may be sure I shall fly to you at once.

"Your loving,

EDITH."

Inclosed was a scrawl from Mab.

"MY ADORED NESSA,—I am quite mad at not being able to see you. This is the old Gorgon's revenge. I would give the world to know what happened when you refused him. I have captivated a rich old person, and if he proposes I shall accept him. I don't believe in love. I suppose you do—just now at all events. I suppose you are a dreadfully spoony couple. If I marry the old person, I shall at once defy grandpapa, and come and spend a week with you in Bryanston Square. It is such a long way off that you couldn't possibly ask anybody for less than a week. But I've no doubt it's charming when you get there. Give my love to St. George. I call him St. George because he rescued you from the dragon. Good-bye, my darling love.

"Always your devoted,

MAB."

Never, at home in her quiet village, had Vanessa longed for the companionship of these girls as she did now—in the heart of the country she had not realized what dullness and solitude meant. She yearned for Susan—in default of seeing her, she would have liked to write her reams of letters; but Susan, as she said herself, was "no scholar," and a letter to her meant labor and sorrow. And Vanessa's letters would not have been intended for other eyes.

As long as Brandon was at home, his wife was happy and radiant as ever, so that he had no idea of her sufferings in his absence, until one morning she astonished him, and herself, too, by bursting into a flood of tears as he was bidding her good-bye, flinging her arms round his neck, and imploring him not to leave her. He had an important appointment, and was compelled to keep it, but all day long he was violently perturbed in

his mind. After all, she was not happy—after his beautiful dream, the awakening he had foreseen was coming; she had been pleased at first, like a child with a new toy, but already she was *desillusionnee* and disappointed. He was as happy as ever himself, or had been up to this disastrous moment; but then his mind was occupied all day, and he had his beautiful darling to return to with fresh zest after his work.

When he reached his office that morning he shut himself in, and, buried in a chair, gave himself over to reflection. He was of an equable temperament; not given to violent emotions, but he could not shake off the bitter sense of disappointment and foreboding which the scene of the morning had caused him. He also had to pay for having been too happy. Being, however, possessed of a practical mind, he realized soon enough what was the cause of Vanessa's disenchantment. She wanted companionship, amusement, but most of all, air and exercise—a London house was to her like a cage to a wild bird. He would fain have said to her as men are wont to say to a wife who complains of loneliness, "Have some woman to stay with you! ask your sister, your cousin, or your aunt!" but Vanessa had no relations and no friends of her own sex, except the two from whom she was cut off by circumstances of which he must be the last to complain. He had no near female relation himself. He turned over in his mind his women friends. Those he would have liked Vanessa to know and be intimate with were not in town now, and there were others who had been friendly enough with him in his bachelor days who would probably take no interest in him now that he was married, and still less in his wife. Something he must do—tears in those radiant eyes there should not be; he would neglect his business—do anything rather than that she should be dissatisfied and unhappy. He would be more with her. Then came a thought which inflicted a strange pang upon him. Would his society always be enough to content her.

After long ruminating, he conceived several plans for his beloved one's benefit, and confided them to her the same evening. She was sitting with her head on his shoulder and his arm round her, in their usual fashion—her tears were forgotten like a child's—she was smiling, caressing, happy as he had always seen her until this morning.

"I have been thinking about you all day, my darling," John Brandon says, tenderly. "I can't bear to see tears in those dear eyes" (kissing them). "You are to be happy—if you are not I shall never forgive myself for having married you."

"But I *am* happy," cries Vanessa, impetuously, "the happiest woman in the world as long as you are with me. I should like to hold you so," flinging her white arms round his neck and clasping him tight, "so that you couldn't get away from me ever again."

"I wish you could," answers Brandon. "But I am not rich enough to cut business yet."

"We could live in a small house instead of a big one," purrs Vanessa, coaxingly. "Think how nice it would be to be always together!"

It is not for Brandon to tell her that satiety results from too much companionship of married lovers—he only caresses her hair, and says it would be heaven upon earth.

“But,” he pursues presently, “since, my dear love, I cannot always stay at home with you, let us think how you are to be amused whilst I am away.”

Vanessa pouts, and swears that in his absence nothing can amuse her.

He, however, returns steadily to the charge. She is to have a nice, pleasant, confidential maid, who is to accompany her in her walks, for she must go out more—he has that very day ordered a victoria because a brougham does not give her air enough—he has opened a subscription at a library. Would she like a dog? and does she not think (this diffidently) that some lessons in music and singing would amuse as well as benefit her? He thinks she plays and sings divinely. but he supposes that one is always capable of being improved in these accomplishments.

After Vanessa has embraced him a thousand times, and asseverated that she wants nothing in the world but him, she consents to his suggestions, and in due course the superior maid is found, and a pug-dog, which becomes the apple of her eye. She enjoys her drives in the victoria, feasts her eyes in the shop-windows every morning, takes interest in her singing lessons, devours hundreds of novels, and, for the present, Brandon sees no more tears, and only one want which he is unable to supply—the want of a woman friend.

CHAPTER XI.

IN his bachelor days Brandon had a considerable circle of acquaintance. But unless a man has a settled position in society, or marries a woman who has, it is extraordinary how this circle narrows if he marries. There were plenty of women in society who had been pleased to know him and to be civil to him—he was a gentleman born and bred, and had good manners. They did not want to marry him—he was not rich enough to give a *cachet* to his business—but they met him in society; he was never intrusive—that was enough. But to know and visit his wife was a very different affair—he must drop out of their sphere into his own place now, unless she happened to be taken up in the proper quarter. Then, wine-merchant, horse dealer, or pedicure, what mattered his business or profession!

Brandon was the last man in the world to thrust himself or any one belonging to him forward. This lessened his chances of getting on considerably. He would have done anything in the world for his wife except run the risk of getting her snubbed. But he asked some of the “good” men whom he knew to come and dine, in the hope that, having seen how beautiful and charming Vanessa was, they would send their women to call on her.

And if it had only depended on the men Mrs. Brandon would soon have had a most refined and desirable circle about her; but,

unfortunately, a man's good word is rarely of much benefit to a pretty woman.

The men told their wives about her: the wives asked the inevitable question, "Who *was* she?" Sometimes the husbands did not know: sometimes they replied that she was the daughter of a country parson. Now it is eminently respectable to be the daughter of a clergyman—more respectable than to be the daughter of any other professional man; but it does not carry any great weight with it unless the clergyman be a bishop or an archdeacon, or the holder of a rich family living.

"But she might be a duchess!" the men said, with enthusiasm, which, somehow, was rather displeasing to their ladies, and secretly damaged Vanessa in their eyes. Two or three of them left cards in Bryanston Square, but that meant nothing—they did not ask for her, nor invite her to their houses after she had left cards in return; and Mrs. Brandon did not even know them by sight.

On the other hand, the wives of many city men, and rich Tyburnians whom Brandon knew, hastened to call upon the newly-married pair, and to entertain them at banquets. Vanessa knew nothing by practical experience of society, or of the different classes of which it is composed; but she soon became aware that these rich, well-fed, over-dressed women, who were sometimes honestly jovial and vulgar, and sometimes had disagreeable affectations of fine ladyism and pedantry, were not congenial to her. She remembered the teachings of Edith and Mabel, and recognized with secret heart-burning that, as the wife of a man of business on a moderate scale, her social status did not entitle her to mix with the people whom she would have liked to know. She was delighted with the men who came without their wives—most of the men who came with their wives were offensive and almost intolerable to her refined taste. She tried carefully to conceal her feelings from her husband, for whom her love continued undiminished. He was a perfect gentleman, she told herself, man of business or not; but after a time when they were invited to rich men's houses, she would say to him, coaxingly, "Don't you think, darling, we are much happier at home together than at those long, stupid dinners?" And, if the feast was not at the house of a client whom he did not wish to offend, he consented to their having a previous engagement. By degrees it began to be whispered in Tyburnia that Mrs. Brandon gave herself airs, and the ladies there asked themselves with a different accentuation, the question, "Who *was* she?" not "Who *was* she?" The daughter of some paltry curate, with a hundred a year, most likely! For they despised poverty as well-bred people despise wealth when it is allied to vulgarity.

There was one visitor always *feted* in Bryanston Square, and though he came often and stayed long, he never overstayed his welcome. He was known to his intimates as Charlie Dallas. His full names and titles were Colonel the Honorable Charles Dallas, formerly of the First Regiment of Guards, from which he retired soon after the Crimean war, with a wound and two

medals. He was agreeable, the reverse of rich, and he was fond of pretty women in a pleasant, fatherly sort of manner.

"I can't think," he used to say, "why old fellows like me don't see that they disgust women by trying to make love to them when they are only too glad to have us for friends. I am the *friend* of every pretty young woman who chooses, and it makes my life very pleasant."

Colonel Dallas was distinguished-looking; his manners were perfect; he always said the right thing, and the pleasant thing, unless some one was rude to him, in which case any friend of Charlie's would have offered odds as to the offender coming off second-best.

He had known and liked Brandon from a boy; but it was only when he became the husband of a loved wife that Colonel Dallas discovered what an immense regard he had for him. Vanessa charmed and delighted him—she perfectly fulfilled his idea of beauty and breeding in a woman—she was vivacious, graceful, gracious; all her instincts were delicate and refined—perhaps her chief charm lay in the fact that she was so delighted with him and took such pleasure in his society.

The colonel was accustomed to be taken up by pretty women, and made much of and thrown over when the particular friend appeared on the scene, and he always knew how to retire with an excellent grace; but here there was no throwing over; no particular friend—he was always received with smiles, and speeded with regrets; and Brandon welcomed him as heartily as Vanessa.

The colonel was very much exercised in his mind on the subject of his beautiful young friend. He loved and admired her—he felt she ought to be in a different sphere, but he was exceedingly puzzled as to whether transplanting her would really conduce to her happiness and to her husband's. She was devoted to Brandon—she *seemed* contented with her lot; and yet, now and then, he fancied he detected in her symptoms of longing after the pleasures and excitements of the world.

Vanessa was, in truth, conscious of secret yearnings—conscious of a disappointment which she would not confess to herself. Hers was the disappointment of almost every young girl who marries. The passionate lover had subsided into the kind, tranquil, affectionate husband, and she, like most women who have just begun to love, would fain have kept the lover for five years, or ten, or, perhaps, to all eternity. It is very hard on women, no doubt, that having the same feelings as, if in a lesser degree than, men (though men ignorantly deny this), that three months' passion should be thought enough to last their lifetime, and one love as much as any decent woman ought to want, whereas men may indulge their feelings *ad infinitum*.

Brandon was so kind and fond that Vanessa would have thought herself a monster of ingratitude to complain; but he was certainly not the Brandon who had wooed her in her country home, and been her cicerone among those lovely foreign scenes. He was secure—he no longer thought her a creature of illimitable perfections whom he had committed a crime in mar-

rying. He loved her perhaps better; she was the dearest, sweetest girl in all the world—she was the only woman who existed for him; but he had got over the demonstrative stage and loved her in a quiet, sober, sensible manner. But that is a manner in which, as a rule, young women do not appreciate being loved.

The winter passed, and by the time the London season began the colonel had taken the place of the superior maid in public, and was Vanessa's escort. Many an older man than Charlie Dallas might have compromised a woman by being her constant companion, but everybody knew that Charlie was a man of honor and "as safe as the bank;" besides, that was "not his line."

The steps of the pair were most frequently turned to the Row, for Vanessa was never tired of this brilliant kaleidoscope, and as the colonel knew every one and who every one was, it made it extremely entertaining. It was from no selfish motives that he refrained from introducing to her the many golden youths who came up to him in the hope of making Vanessa's acquaintance, but from honest scruples about her husband's peace of mind. He was so genuinely devoted to her that he would have done anything to give her pleasure.

Just at first Vanessa was quite content to look on and know the names of the fashionable women who wore pretty frocks and had a *chic* air, and of the men who were so handsome and well dressed, and at whose numbers she was astonished. She had been told that Englishmen were a good-looking race; now it was proved to her by ocular demonstration. By and by when she observed that most of these attractive young people of both sexes seemed to know and to enjoy the most pleasant and intimate relations with each other, she began to feel a little bit left out in the cold. When one fine May day the colonel took her into the Mall and showed her the ladies going to Court in their diamonds and feathers, with their big bouquets and smiling, well-satisfied faces, a pang of envy shot through her breast. For Vanessa had ambitious instincts, and a great love of and desire for pleasure—she had, besides, the innate consciousness that she was fit to share in the world's galas. Colonel Dallas, who was exceedingly shrewd, understood her feelings and was more than ever exercised in his mind. He asked himself over and over again what would be the result of giving her the *entree* into society. She was as pure and innocent as she was beautiful; but untested virtue counts for nothing—she was simply devoted to her husband, but when these handsome young fellows, for whose idle hands it is Satan's especial delight to find mischief, began to make ardent love to her (as, of course, after the manner of their kind and the custom of the day they would), what about the good, well-meaning, middle-aged husband at home?

One day as they sat in the Row and two pretty women passed talking with great vivacity to two gallant cavaliers, Vanessa sighed, and said:

"How happy all these women seem! How delightful it must be to know every one—every one nice, at least!"

That evening the colonel took up his parable as he and

Brandon were sipping their after-dinner claret. Vanessa had just left them.

"You are a fortunate man, Brandon," Dallas began, though the remark was made more with a view to opening the ball of conversation than because he really thought his host what he professed to think him. To be the husband of a very beautiful woman was, to his experienced mind, rather a doubtful piece of good fortune.

But Brandon answered in the heartiest manner, evidently devoid of all misgiving.

"You are right, colonel, I am."

"I don't think there is a lovelier woman in London," pursued Dallas; "indeed, I am quite sure there is not."

"So am I," said Brandon, with emphasis.

"Talk of — and —," exclaimed the colonel mentioning the names of some ladies who had taken double firsts in the ranks of beauty, "why, they can't hold a candle to her."

"So I think," answered Brandon.

Now came the difficult part of the colonel's task.

"She ought to be among them; she ought to be in the best society—she is fit for anything!" And he paused, waiting to see the effect of his words.

Brandon met him more than half way.

"That she is!" he said; "I only wish to Heaven I could take her into the society she is fit for; but you know, colonel, in my position, it is not a very easy matter. I used to know plenty of women of the right sort, but I can't *ask* them to notice my wife, and they don't seem inclined to do it of their own accord."

"Naturally," answered the colonel. "When women are *obliged* to admit a new beauty they do it with a tolerably good grace, and even pretend to rave about her, but, by Jove! they'll keep her out as long as they can."

"I should be only too glad to see her in her proper sphere," said Brandon. "I would do anything to get her there short of making her look small and subjecting her to rebuffs. You know what biting snubs you well-bred people can give!"

"But," observed the colonel, fixing his eye on a picture in the distance, "supposing now your wife had an opportunity of getting into society, you wouldn't have any—any scruples? You know we live in—in rather a fast age; a pretty woman is subject to—to—h'm—a good deal of admiration."

"I shouldn't have the smallest scruple in the world," replied honest John Brandon. "God bless her! I'd trust her anywhere. All I want is to see her happy and amused."

Perhaps the colonel thought his host over-confident. He heaved a slight sigh.

"May I bring my niece, Hermione Fane, to call on her?" he asked, after a moment's pause.

"I should think it very kind of you," answered Brandon, warmly.

So there was nothing left for Charles Dallas but to arrange the matter with his niece. It is very dangerous and imprudent to

promise anything for a lady, especially that she will be kind and civil to an unknown member of her sex, but the colonel was tolerably confident about his niece, who was a very kind-hearted and pleasant little lady, and exceedingly fond of him into the bargain.

The next afternoon he was ushered into her boudoir at six o'clock.

"Is it possible," he said, after kissing her, "that I am so fortunate as to find you alone! Where are all the *soupirants*?"

Mrs. Fane is small, pretty, extremely animated, and beautifully dressed. She looks the blithest little mortal in existence—her path seems strewn with roses, and although all the world knows there is one very sharp thorn among them, she steps on it with such an unflinching smile that no one believes she suffers any inconvenience from it.

"How are you, dear Uncle Charlie?" she says, gayly. "I am 'not at home' to-day, but Peregrine is a wise man, and knows that you are always to be let in. I will give you some tea, and we'll have a nice chat. And pray, sir," archly, teapot in hand, "what are these mysterious rumors I hear of you, and who is the beautiful and unknown fair one by whose side you are daily seen, and with whom you disappear regularly at luncheon-time to some haunt beyond the ken of civilization? You were watched one day as far as the Marble Arch, and across Oxford Street, and then they gave you up in despair."

"That is just what I have come to talk to you about," answers the colonel, smiling.

"Is it true?" cries Mrs. Fane, "that she belongs to a celebrated shop in Oxford Street, and that you are going to marry her?"

"Yes, Hermy." replies the colonel, gravely. "Quite true. Quite as true, at least, as everything else which *they say*."

"Uncle Charlie, you positively frighten me!" Mrs. Fane looks prepared to take him *au grand sérieux*. Colonel Dallas sips his tea and eats his muffin with provoking deliberation, whilst his niece scans him with anxiety. It is not an entirely unheard of occurrence for a gentleman of his age to make a *mesalliance*.

"Don't tease me!" continues Hermione, beginning to smile. "Tell me the worst at once."

"My dear," observes the colonel, holding out his cup for more tea, "it is very disrespectful of you to think your uncle an old fool."

"Oh, as for that," says Mrs. Fane, looking relieved, "love makes a fool of everybody."

"Except of you."

"Except of me," she answers, gayly. "But now, come, you shall have no more tea, nor muffins," playfully snatching the plate from him, "until you have spoken out. Who is she? where does she come from? how did you meet her? etc., etc., etc."

"Who is she? She is Mrs. Brandon."

"Then it is true about the shop?"

"No—not even though her name is Brandon."

"And is she a Mrs.?"

"She is very much a Mrs. She adores her husband, and he is devoted to her."

"Oh, Uncle Charlie, and are you going to be the Mephisto to come in and interfere with all this adoration?"

"I trust not," answers the colonel, devoutly, as a secret qualm comes over him whether indirectly he may not be helping to bring about such a result.

"She is a clergyman's daughter—married to a very good fellow whom I have known from a boy, but at present she doesn't know any one of the right sort, and I want you, Hermy, to stand sponsor for her."

"My dear Uncle Charlie!" cries Mrs. Fane, dismayed, "don't ask me to bring out a new beauty! Oh, if you knew what a bore it is to go about with these woman, and to be mobbed, and made a show of, and to do a sort of sheep-dog business! It is so much pleasanter to be on one's own account. I don't care for reflected luster myself."

"My dear girl," cries the colonel, warmly, "I don't want you to do anything to put yourself to inconvenience. All I want is to get you to come and call on her with me, and ask her to luncheon. When once you have seen her, I know you will like her."

"No, Uncle Charlie," replies Hermione, shaking her head, "that would be impossible. No woman ever yet liked another woman that a man wanted her to like. Still, for your sake—by the way, what on earth is your motive? If she is so lovely and delightful, why don't you keep her to yourself?"

"Because I am like my sex, unselfish," smiles the colonel.

"Say because you're unlike your sex, my dear," retorts his niece. "Well, yes, I'll go, certainly. Not to-morrow, because I have to drive Lady W., nor the next day, because of the Fancy Fair, nor Saturday, because I'm going to see Gerard play polo; Sunday, of course, I can't, and Monday I must devote to——"

The colonel's face falls, and Mrs. Fane observing this, breaks off, and says:

"Very well, I'll go on Monday. Come and lunch first, and then we will drive off to—where is it? Highgate—Hampstead—Islington?"

"It's rather more than a mile from your door, my dear. By the way, why do you fashionable ladies always pretend that a place you don't want to go to is such a long way off?"

"Very well, Monday, then. And I am to ask her to lunch, and to get some people to meet her. If she doesn't go out much, I suppose any day will suit her?"

"Any day," responds the colonel, warmly. "Thank you, my dear. Good-bye!" And after kissing his niece, Colonel Dallas departs well pleased, whilst Hermione wishes Mrs. Brandon at Coventry, or some place a good deal further off than Bryanston Square.

CHAPTER XII.

CONTRARY to all precedent, Mrs. Fane took a violent fancy to Vanessa the moment she set eyes on her; declared her to be perfectly lovely and charming, and insisted at once on fixing a day for the luncheon party. Vanessa, on her part, had a difficulty in finding words to express how pretty, how sweet, how altogether delightful she found Mrs. Fane. The colonel was enchanted.

"Now who shall I have to meet her?" said Hermione, thoughtfully, as they drove away from the door. "I must get two or three nice women, who may be useful to her and won't be jealous, and"—laughing—"I must not have any seductive young men on your account, to say nothing of the poor husband's."

"She is too fond of her husband to care about seductive young men," replied the colonel.

"Perhaps she has never seen any," remarked Hermione, skeptically. "I shall ask Mildred, and then, of course, if she comes, Gerard will. If he were not so infatuated about her, he would be sure to fall in love with the new beauty, but I think he is quite safe. What lovely eyes! they seem to float in some heavenly liquid! And what a wonderful color they are! You really are a very good judge, my dear uncle. And she is not the least conscious nor affected. I hope she won't get spoilt."

As Vanessa is a little bit nervous about her *debut*, it is arranged that the colonel shall call for her and accompany her to Mrs. Fane's house in Grosvenor Place. When he arrives in Bryanston Square, the victoria is already at the door, and Vanessa is walking up and down the drawing-room in a highly nervous state, waiting for him. Excitement has given a beautiful little flush to her creamy skin—the colonel is delighted to find her looking handsomer than ever. She wears a very fresh, white toilet; excellent and critical as is his taste, he finds nothing to be improved or to alter in it.

He does not seem at all in a hurry to start, but takes a chair, and begins to chat.

"Shall we not be late?" asks Vanessa at last, having cast several meaning glances at the clock.

"Lots of time," he replies. "People generally stop out in the park until after two."

He has an object in being a little late to-day, though he is habitually the most punctual of men. But he knows that a pretty woman creates a greater impression by entering a room than by being found seated there. After all, though it is ten minutes past two when they arrive, there are only three persons assembled; the hostess, another lady, and a very handsome young man.

"This is the head of the house," says the colonel, smilingly taking his nephew by the arm after Vanessa has been presented

by Mrs. Fane to Lady Mildred Belair. "Mrs. Brandon, let me introduce Lord Ravenhold to you. Gerard, Mrs. Brandon."

He takes her hand; gives her the frank, admiring glance which men are wont to bestow on beauty, and says how glad he is to have the pleasure of making her acquaintance. Then Mrs. Fane monopolizes her, and Lord Ravenhold returns to the sofa beside Lady Mildred. The other guests drop in one by one—they do not seem to pair until they get inside and luncheon is announced. Vanessa finds herself between Lord Ravenhold, who sits at the bottom of the table, and Colonel Dallas. The colonel is too hungry to talk. Lord Ravenhold divides his attention equally between his lunch and Lady Mildred, and Vanessa has time to look about her and take observations. There is not the tenth part of the luxury and ostentation here that she has seen in the houses of city magnates—everything is elegant, yet comparatively simple; there is not an atom of *gene*; not a trace of "company manners;" every one is spontaneous, natural, perfectly at home—there is a freedom that would make the under-jaw of Tyburnia drop, and yet it is unmistakably better bred than the stilted affectation of politeness of people not sufficiently confident in themselves. Perhaps there is too much license in the manners of the society of the day; perhaps an assumption of coarseness, slanginess, incorrectness of speech; but it has its own *cachet*, and is as different from ordinary vulgarity as French wit is from English. Vanessa could not observe the rest of the company as minutely as she would have liked for the reason that a good many curious and admiring eyes were turned her way, and later, the colonel, having appeased his appetite, began to talk to her. Once now and then Lord Ravenhold turned and spoke a few courteous words, but it was evident that his thoughts were centered on his right-hand neighbor. When the ladies repaired to the drawing-room, Lady Mildred came and chatted pleasantly to Vanessa; she was in high good humor; perhaps because, in spite of Mrs. Brandon's loveliness, Gerard Ravenhold had showed no symptoms of a failing allegiance to herself. When the men joined them, the colonel brought up a very good-looking young fellow, whom he introduced as Mr. Algernon Howard.

"May I come and talk to you?" says the latter, dropping gently into the seat beside her as if he had known her all his life. "I've heard so much about you. And I hope you know a little about me."

Vanessa looks at him with interest. This is Edith's "Algy" about whom she has received so many heartrending confidences.

"Oh, yes," she answers. "I have often heard of you."

"And you sympathize with me, don't you?" he says, confidentially, bringing his good-looking young face close to hers. "I know you do—you believe in love. You married for love—you wouldn't have old Sir Bertram. Quite right, I admire you for it! What a thundering old brute he is!"

For a moment Vanessa is a little bit taken aback at finding these state secrets spoken of so lightly and familiarly by a stran-

ger; but soon the ease of her interlocutor's manner communicates itself to her, and she finds herself talking as naturally to him as though they had been children together.

"Don't think me impertinent," murmurs Algy, "for talking about your affairs—of course, Edie tells me everything, and I know she tells you everything, so there ought to be a bond of union between us, oughtn't there?"

"Yes," says Vanessa, smiling. What a good-looking lad he is! she can understand Edith's repugnance to the rich lover. "I am so sorry I never see her and Mab now," she continues. "At least, I see them—I meet them often in the Row, but I look the other way, because I know they are not allowed to look at or speak to me."

"What an infernal shame! It is all that old brute. I say, Mrs. Brandon, I hope you don't mind my saying so, but I'm so awfully glad you didn't have him. Of course Edie has told me all about you, and how beautiful you were, but I suppose words are poor, as they say, sometimes."

Mr. Howard makes his speech in such a modest deprecating manner that Vanessa does not even feel embarrassed. But then a genuine compliment is seldom embarrassing.

"Have you seen Edith lately?" she asks.

"I met her at a ball last night," he answers, eager to talk about his own affairs, as young men in love are prone to be. "I only got one dance with her, but we did manage to hide for ten minutes behind a pillar and dodge her old mother. She's a regular mercenary old dev—old lady, she is. They're worrying my poor little girl out of her life to have that fellow Chatham. He isn't a bad sort of fellow, and he's got lots of money, but Edie don't care for that, thank God! She's as true as steel—she swears she'll stick to me, and I know she will. After all, money isn't everything, is it, Mrs. Brandon? It's awfully jolly to have it, but what's the good of it if you're tied to some one you loathe. There's an heiress my people are trying to cram down my throat, but I'll see her blessed first. I wouldn't a bit mind being poor if I could have Edie, and she doesn't mind. I'm not an extravagant fellow, only, don't you know, one must do what other fellows do. I'm trying not to smoke so many cigarettes, and I only drink whisky and soda—at my own expense, I mean."

Algy finds so interested a listener in Vanessa that he continues to pour out his confessions—it is charming to confide in a beautiful and sympathetic woman. Seeing the pair so engrossed with each other, the colonel feels a little bit uneasy. He is not in the secret of Mr. Howard's love-affair, and the lad appears so impassioned and Vanessa so eagerly attentive, that the outside world might well imagine them to be carrying on a little flirtation on their own account.

"Do I bore you?" says Algy, presently, fixing his blue eyes earnestly on Mrs. Brandon's face.

"No, no," cries Vanessa, "it interests me beyond everything. What is there in this world worth having in comparisor with love?"

In spite of his passion for Edith, Algy cannot help being impressed by the charms of his companion.

"What an aw—awfully" (he has a slight stammer) "lucky chap Brandon must be!" he remarks with enthusiasm. "You're not like other pretty women—do you know, Mrs. Brandon, nearly all pretty women are mercenary."

"Are they?" says Vanessa, smiling.

He is such a boy, so good-looking, so natural, that nothing he says seems to come amiss. After all, everything depends so much more on the manner than the words.

"You *do* think Edie cares for me, don't you?" he resumes, harping back to the beloved theme.

"I am sure of it," returns Vanessa, with immense emphasis.

The party is beginning to disperse—now there is only the colonel left, talking to Mrs. Fane, and Lord Ravenhold and Lady Mildred whispering in a corner.

"I suppose I must be going," says Mrs. Brandon, who has just caught the colonel's eye for the second time.

"Must you? What a bore! I should like to go on talking to you for hours. When shall I see you again? May I come and call?"

"Oh, yes, do," she answers, a little bit embarrassed, being not yet woman of fashion enough to think it a matter of course that young men should call upon her in her husband's absence.

"What is the best time to find you?" he asks, confidently expecting to be asked to luncheon.

"My husband generally comes home about five," she says, "but then we often drive out after that."

Mr. Howard is a little bit nonplussed. He has no idea of calling when Mr. Brandon is at home. Three is a very objectionable number, and you can't confide in a woman in the presence of her husband. He does not, however, lose his presence of mind.

"Thanks, I'll come," he says as she is rising, "and I dare say, I shall see you in the Row one of these mornings."

"After all, I have not had a chat with you," exclaims Mr. Fane at parting, "and I really must. If I look in upon you to-morrow at six, will you give me some tea, and then we can have a nice little talk all to ourselves?"

"I shall be delighted," answers Vanessa.

"You are not to come and interrupt our *tete-a-tete*, Uncle Charlie," and Mrs. Fane turns to the colonel.

"Certainly not, my dear. Have you ever known me indiscreet?"

"Never—never in my life! To-morrow, then," shaking Vanessa's hand in a very friendly manner.

Lord Ravenhold and Lady Mildred have also risen to speed the parting guest.

"May I come and see you?" says her ladyship, who has been asked by Ravenhold's sister to be civil to the new beauty, and Vanessa expresses her pleasure at the proposal very prettily.

"She is quite lovely," observes Lady Mildred, as the door closes upon Mrs. Brandon.

"Is she?" says Ravenhold, looking fixedly at her ladyship. He has very eloquent eyes, and they say distinctly, "I do not see any one but you."

Lady Mildred smiles and feels benevolently disposed toward Mrs. Brandon and the rest of the world. Meanwhile, the colonel is putting Vanessa into her carriage.

"I will say good-bye," he says. "You have seen enough of me for to-day."

"No, no, I have not," she answers, eagerly; "I want to talk to you about it all. Do come with me."

So he takes his place beside her.

"It has been delightful," she exclaims, as they drive away. "I can't tell you how I have enjoyed it. How nice everybody was, and how kind!"

"Mr. Howard seemed to be *very* nice and kind," observes the colonel, and Vanessa detects a slightly injured tone in his voice.

"He is in love with Edith—Edith Vaughan—do you not know? I have told you. He was talking about her the whole time—he is so dreadfully in love with her and so unhappy."

"Oh, then, it was vicarious?" remarks the colonel, looking relieved.

"What do you mean? Vicarious?" asks Vanessa, fixing her eyes on him; but the colonel declines to enter into explanations, and changes the subject.

"What do you think of Ravenhold?"

"He is very, very handsome. And he seems devoted to Lady Mildred. Is he going to marry her?"

"My dear child, what are you talking about? She has a husband already."

Vanessa blushes crimson, whilst a positively awe-struck expression comes into her face.

The colonel feels embarrassed.

"They are very great friends—very old friends," he says, hurriedly.

"Mr. Fane was not there?" remarks Vanessa, after a pause. Her tone is interrogative.

"He is very seldom in town."

"What is he like? Is he nice?"

"He is a lout," answers the colonel, with contemptuous disgust.

"I am sorry," exclaims Vanessa, sincerely. "She is so charming. Is she—unhappy?"

"She manages to get along. After all, that is about all the most of us can do."

Vanessa is not accustomed to this pessimist strain from her friend—she looks rather unhappy. He, observing it, lays his hand lightly upon her, and says:

"I am a dyspeptic old person. I ought not to have eaten that *foie gras* at luncheon. It never agrees with me. I know it, and yet I can't resist it. But you, my dear—may your path be always strewn with roses! You have a good husband, and you love him—after all, that is a very great slice of good fortune for one of us poor mortals."

"Indeed it is," responds Vanessa, brightly. "See," she cries, in delighted accents, "there he is just going up the steps. You can't think, darling" (this to Brandon as the carriage stops and he helps her out), "what a delightful morning I have had."

Whether it is the *foie gras* or the sight of too much happiness that disagrees with the colonel, he declines to enter the house, and, after bidding the pair a friendly adieu, strolls off toward his club.

"I suppose the ice is broken," he soliloquizes. "Ah! she'll see and hear some things now to astonish her. But she will soon get used to it. I'm very glad Ravenhold is so taken up with that woman. If he had not been, he would have made love to her as sure as—fate."

It is well that the future is shrouded from our eyes, otherwise the colonel's musings would have been of a less self-gratulatory character as he walked clubward.

CHAPTER XIII.

VISCOUNT RAVENHOLD was a very handsome young man indeed, and particularly attractive in the eyes of the fair, to whom he was quite devoted. He was a keen sportsman, and something of an athlete; but there is no doubt that his favorite distraction was *filer le parfait amour*: he was one of the few men who would have stayed away willingly from a hunt or a shoot at the request of a woman with whom he was in love. He was devoured by chronic heart-hunger—the object of his passion might change (did, in fact, not unfrequently), but the desire to love always remained. He denied strenuously that he was fickle or unfaithful, and swore that he should be the most faithful lover created if—

There were always ifs which stepped in and interfered with his fidelity—the most common if was if he could find the right woman. Then he so often thought that he had found her, but after a time she disappointed him. It was always *her* fault, but, nothing daunted, he renewed his researches.

His grandfather, the late lord, had been endowed with the same affectionate nature, and the indulgence of it had led him into so many imprudences that he had got to be considered a very wicked old man indeed. In half a century, a man who is perpetually in love and is prevented from being so legitimately by the ties which he has primarily contracted, must inevitably get himself into considerable discredit with society, which, whatever it may know and put up with in secret, insists on a decent face being shown to it. The old lord declined to present a decent face—he outraged the world's opinion over and over again in that one particular; and so in time it ostracized him, for which he, however, cared nothing. He was a gentleman and a man of honor in every respect, except where a woman was concerned; the moment that a petticoat stepped in, honor, conscience, prudence, were dispersed to the four winds of heaven. He had been very successful in his loves—because, added to good looks and charm of manner, he had an indomitable will which

always led him on to gratify his passions, though it never helped him to restrain them. He begrudged nothing in the world to the woman he was in love with for the time, and was the most devoted and passionate of worshipers. Like Henry VIII., would fain have crowned each new love at the expense of her predecessor. In his time he had married three wives, all for love, and had come to hate each of them with extraordinary vindictiveness. His eldest son he detested for no better reason than because he was to inherit the good things his father could not carry away with him, but the heir died first. He liked his grandson little better, and the only member of the family who found favor in his eyes was his granddaughter, Hermione Dallas, known to us as Mrs. Fane. She was high-spirited and full of fun—she amused him and was not afraid of him as most people were. She was seventeen and her brother twenty when the old lord was gathered to his fathers.

Up to the present time no open *esclandre* had tarnished the young peer's escutcheon—he had been within an acè of getting into trouble more than once, but only within an ace. He was very good-natured, very popular—a much more genial companion than his grandfather; and, if he inherited those amorous proclivities from his ancestor, how far was he to blame? How far are any of us to blame for failings or attributes that we distinctly inherit? But it would be futile to stop and try to arrange this moral fifteen puzzle. I present him to you as he is—a very good-looking, charming-mannered young fellow, with an extremely inflammable heart; a man very dangerous to the peace of mind of beautiful young ladies going about the world with a tendency to the same disorder. It was not, therefore, without reason that Colonel Dallas congratulated himself upon his nephew's wandering affections being chained for the moment, although he was confident in Vanessa's virtuous principles, to say nothing of her love for her husband.

"He is a dear good fellow," the colonel had been heard to remark, "a much better fellow than ever my poor father was; but he is devilish like him in some ways—devilish like!" and what those ways were, his interlocutor had no occasion to inquire. Every one of the past generation knew what the old lord had been. The rising generation would have found it quite impossible to be interested in what any dead old man had done, however handsome or fascinating tradition might report him to have been. "Faugh! how disgusting to think of old people ever having been in love!" they would say.

Mrs. Fane took such an immense fancy to Vanessa that, in spite of the whirl of gayety in which she lived, she found time to see a good deal of her. And Vanessa, who was not, like Hermione, rich in friends, became still more attached to the gay, pretty, butterfly-like little lady—even the colonel had to sink into a second place.

Thanks to Mrs. Fane, Vanessa began to have a circle of fashionable acquaintances, and was invited to several balls. No *debutante* ever rushed into gayety with more wild delight than Vanessa, who all her life had longed for pleasure. Dancing be-

came a passion with her—she had received this branch of her education from Edith and Mabel, and was more than proficient in it. Society was a word almost synonymous with heaven to the vicar's lovely daughter. True, she saw a great deal that surprised and even shocked her; she heard things in the *beau monde* that made her cheeks blush and her ears tingle; but one gets accustomed to everything. Scores of good-looking young men tried to make love to her; but she was utterly impervious to their best efforts, as a woman who has a real and honest love for one man is to the advances of others. She treated their fine speeches, their languorous or impassioned airs with a gay ridicule which, however, had nothing in it to wound their *amour propre*, and seeing she was hopeless *for the present*, as they said, they danced with, flattered, and paid court to her, but took their serious intentions elsewhere. Mr. Brandon was always invited with his wife: to evening parties, at all events; and, at first, he frequently accompanied her, and was immensely and honestly proud of her success. His eyes beamed with genuine pleasure at her pleasure, and he made a martyr of himself with the best grace in the world. No pang of jealousy crossed his honest heart—when she returned to his side, there was always a soft, affectionate look in her eyes, which never shone there for any one else. Late hours and standing about, with no particular amusement except watching his beautiful wife, began to pall upon him a little after a time, and Vanessa had rather remorseful scruples about inflicting such frequent penance upon him. So, occasionally, to spare him, she went with Mrs. Fane, and he was perfectly satisfied and contented with this arrangement, and congratulated himself upon being able to seek his pillow at the hour when the uneasy searchers for pleasure are beginning their nightly toil.

Vanessa did not become a fashionable lady and lie in bed until midday to recruit her shattered forces, but appeared bright and smiling at the breakfast-table, declaring, in spite of her husband's affectionate remonstrances, that the later she went to bed the earlier she felt inclined to rise. Nor did she grow pale and waxen; being thoroughly healthy, and having lived a quiet life, the change and excitement rather did her good than otherwise, and Brandon had no cause for uneasiness as to the effects of her dissipation. And as they were to spend August and September at the Vicarage, if she should by chance lose any of her lilies and roses meantime, she would have plenty of leisure to grow them again there.

I am disposed to think that her first season in London was quite the happiest period of Vanessa's life, for who can call passionate joys alternated by fever of unrest and agonies of doubt, happiness? She loved her husband with devoted affection in spite of the young Romeos and Lotharios who fluttered about her, and felt no desire to exchange him for any one of them. And Brandon, who was not at all the sort of man to go out of his way to suspect or doubt, was tranquilly and happily contented, and had not a shadow of fear for the present or the future. The scruples which had afflicted him last year had taken wings, and

a happy, unclouded security dwelt in his breast. The sight of Captain Lovelace's languishing glances, or Lord Juan's arm encircling his wife's waist in the waltz caused no Othello-like sensation in his heart—she was happy and amused—*ergo*, he was the same.

Although Vanessa was frequently at Mrs. Fane's house, she rarely encountered Lord Ravenhold there. In fact, his friends saw very little of him unless they happened to be in company with Lady Mildred Belair. Mrs. Fane spoke of him sometimes, and lightly expressed a hope that he would not get himself into trouble, and Vanessa, not knowing what to say, feeling that it was very terrible and shocking for a man to be in love with a married woman, yet not wishing to express disapprobation of a brother to his sister, generally took refuge in silence.

Mrs. Fane interpreted her friend's silence quite correctly—more than that, she respected her virtuous and innocent ideas, as she called them. Once only she said, turning very sharply and suddenly to Vanessa:

“My dear, you are a very happy woman—you have an excellent husband whom you adore and who adores you. But suppose now, you were married to a brute whom you could not help despising and who detested you and outraged your feelings, should you think it dreadfully wicked to like any one else?”

“But I should never have married him,” answered Vanesa, gravely, opening her eyes a little wider than usual.

Whereupon Mrs. Fane dashed up impetuously from her seat, and, flying to the piano, began to play a wild tarantella with great *entrain*. From that she broke into “Auld Robin Gray,” sang it with immense pathos, and then, rising, she went gently toward Vanessa with a tear in her eye and a smile on her lips, saying:

“I wish I had been born a country mouse, or a vicar's daughter. Then, perhaps, I should have found my Darby. I should make a first rate Joan.”

At this juncture a visitor was announced.

Hermione Fane, although she presented such a smiling face to the world, had a very unpleasant skeleton in her cupboard. She kept him fast locked up, and though the world tried to look through the keyhole and the cracks, and listened attentively to hear his bones rattle, it never succeeded in having ocular or oral demonstration of him. So it delivered the verdict that she was a thoroughly mercenary young woman without a grain of heart. The skeleton, as a matter of fact, was clothed in the fleshy garb of a somewhat stout and coarse-featured young man, Giles Fane by name, who was the husband of Hermione. Society saw but little of him, a circumstance which it did not regret, as he was neither agreeable nor amusing, nor, having a wife, eligible.

There was only one person in the world who cared for him (or perhaps we should say two, but of the second, more later), his mother; and what man is there so loutish, so odious, so intolerable that a tender spot does not dwell for him in his mother's

breast? Lady Cornelia Fane doted on her son, but at the same time he was her despair. She was a lady of great refinement, and devoted to society—her son was a hopeless lout, who abhorred it. No tutor, no maternal cares and admonitions, had ever succeeded in licking him into shape; he loved low company, and if he was compelled to keep any other made himself exceedingly unpleasant to it. People said it was very strange, as his father had been a man of great culture—as for his mother, she was thorough-bred to the tips of her fingers. The cause, however, was not very far to seek—only a generation further back—though the facts were not known to every one. Mr. Giles Fane, the grandfather of the present man, had married in middle life a lady in his own position. By her he had only one child, a daughter, who, in due time, grew up and married. Mrs. Fane, after becoming a grandmother, died; and for some years her husband mourned her loss. As he was verging upon his seventieth year, being still a very hale old gentleman, he became violently enamored of a buxom young woman, a daughter of a laborer on his estate. As he had always been a moral, respectable, church-going man, there was only one course open to him, which was to marry the young woman. She was very happy to honor him with her hand, and we may imagine the gnashing of teeth of his daughter, and her children, who had always looked upon themselves as the heirs of Mr. Fane's very fine property.

Within a reasonable time the old squire became the father of a son, but his happiness at this event was sorely damped by the conviction which had been forced upon him that his wife was a very low and vulgar person indeed, and entirely unfit to make the smallest pretense of being a lady. He, himself, from being the most respected man in the county had fallen into disrepute since his foolish marriage, and was shunned by all the ladies and looked coldly upon as an old fool by most of the men. Mrs. Fane *would* consort with the housemaids, and was on the most familiar terms with the grooms—she ate in a manner that revolted her husband, and had many little manners and customs, natural to her class, but eminently shocking to a refined mind. The culminating point was reached when one day the squire, returning unusually early from hunting, found her engaged in a game of romps with one of the footmen. Of course there was no more actual harm in this than there would be in Lady Hilda having a bear-fight with Lord Tom Noddy or Sir Carnaby Jinks (a diversion much in vogue at the present time). Mrs. Fane was even less well connected than her footman, who was the son of a small farmer. The result, however, was that the gentleman was kicked out of the house, and the lady sent after him in less violent fashion, nor was she ever allowed to come inside its doors again. Her child was then six months old, and from that time the one object of the squire's life was to bring up the boy among the most refined influences, so that no taint of the mother's blood might appear in him. None ever did, but *en revanche* it all came out in his son, who, from earliest childhood, showed an inveterate love of low company, and, whenever he got the chance.

would make his way to the stables or the keepers' and gardeners' cottages.

When he was nine years old his father died, and he literally became his own master, as he had even then a very much stronger will than his mother. He was sent to Eton, but they declined to have his company there after ten months' idleness and insubordination. Left to himself and the society he loved, he was a good-natured boor: force him into another sphere and he became intolerable. So he grew up to man's estate, utterly declining to be or seem a gentleman—he spent his time in shooting, hunting, ferreting, rat-hunting; his friends and associates were his keepers and some of the least respectable of his tenants. He would not have the county men at the Court nor any of the men whom his mother wished to invite to share his excellent shooting, nor would he even conform so far to her wishes as to play host to the smallest party or to wear evening dress. As long as she let him alone he was fond of her and good-natured enough, and would have given her anything he had in the world, but no longer. Her despair culminated when she heard that he had a low entanglement, and, worse—much worse—had promised to marry the girl. She fell into such a state of passionate grief that even Giles was touched, and consented to go abroad with her for two or three months.

There they met Mrs. Dallas and Hermione, and, for the first time in his life, Giles Fane found himself able to talk to and be amused by a young lady. His mother did everything in her power to foster his prepossession, Mrs. Dallas followed suit, and Hermione, who liked pleasure, and whose young life had been considerably hampered by the want of money, was not altogether averse to the idea of marrying a rich young man. She saw only the best side of him—he seemed very good-natured—she fancied that she would be able to turn him round her finger, and Lady Cornelia made the very best of him and persuaded Hermoine that he was devotedly in love with her, but too shy to show it. Giles was coaxed and cajoled and flattered by his mother into believing that Miss Dallas was desperately in love with him, and was spurred on to proposing to make her Mrs. Fane. Hermione accepted him, and though it would be untrue to say she was in love with him, she thought she liked him enough to get on perfectly well with him, and had every intention of being a good and affectionate wife. Lady Cornelia hurried on the marriage, terrified lest the smallest delay should give her son the opportunity of changing his mind.

CHAPTER XIV.

A SPEEDY awakening was in store for Hermoine. In a month's time she was fully alive to the fact that her husband was an irreclaimable boor, and that he did not love, never had loved her. A shrewd suspicion visited her that there was some other person who possessed the hold on his affections that she could not obtain. If he had been really in love with her, she might, nay, doubtless, would have influenced him considerably for his own

benefit, though, at the best, he could never have been anything but what is called a rough diamond. An excellent simile, by the way, for what pleasure is the rough stone capable of giving to any beholder, though the possessor may know its intrinsic value and speculate upon what it might be worth if it were polished? Soon after their marriage, Giles Fane took his bride home to their fine old place, Orange Court, built in the time of William and Mary. Any pleasure she might have had at first in its part possession was soon destroyed by the experience of her husband's home manners and customs. He resumed his shooting jacket and short pipe; he returned with delighted zest to the society of his former associates. The county called—it admired and liked Mrs. Fane—it invited the newly-married couple, but Giles would neither receive visitors nor go to their houses, and the bride could not well make her appearance alone. Having a very fine spirit, she addressed some very bitter remonstrances to him, at which he turned sullen; told her that she had been forced down his throat when he did not care a rush for her, and that he knew devilish well what she married him for. She might go where she liked and spend what she chose, but this was his home; here he would be master and do as he liked, and no d—d stuck up people should come here to turn up their noses at him. He kept his shooting for men he liked and who had a right to enjoy it, not for a parcel of fools whom he hated the sight of.

Hermione took pen and poured out her bitter indignation to Lady Cornelia, who, half frightened, half remorseful, came off to the Court at once to mediate. Poor woman! she had meant everything for the best, and it had most unmistakably turned out for the worst: she was greeted on both sides with the most passionate reproaches. Why, cried Hermione, had she condemned her to this detestable fate? Why had she pretended that Giles was in love with her when she knew to the contrary? Why had she not told her of his ways and habits, of his low tastes and companions? On the other hand, her son said with sullen fury that she had ruined his life; that she had married him to a fine lady who was full of airs and graces and had the devil's own temper, and that she had prevented his marrying the woman he loved, and driven him into sin, because his she should be and no other man's as long as he lived.

Lady Cornelia had that terror of an *esclandre* which is inherent in the breast of every well-bred woman—she lived in an agony lest her daughter-in-law should hear of the rival whom her husband openly visited, and who, in fact, had him completely under her thumb and boasted of her influence. The mother was bitterly punished for her schemes, though she maintained to her own conscience that they had been entirely designed for her son's benefit and happiness. She had, besides, stings of remorse about Hermione, of whose feelings she had not thought at all, but only that she was lucky, being a poor girl, in getting a rich husband. She saw that there was only one thing for it now, and that was to get the ill-matched pair apart as much as possible, and she proposed to Hermione to have a

town-house and to make it her principal home. Hermione, being miserable, acquiesced. Lady Cornelia obtained *carte blanche* from her son, who was absolutely indifferent to money, and the ladies between them made a very luxurious residence of the house in Grosvenor Place. But Hermione chafed and fretted—she felt herself disgraced and neglected—her mother-in-law might tell specious lies to the world and she might turn a smiling face to it, but her heart knew its own bitterness. No matter that the man who repudiated her was a boor and a lout; it was equally degrading to her that she had no influence over him and not the smallest hold upon his affections.

Lady Cornelia, who was most anxious that the world should be kept in ignorance of the real state of affairs, insisted on their spending Christmas at Orange Court, and on this occasion, most unfortunately, the knowledge of why her husband was indifferent to her was forced upon Hermione. She had been married five months and he had already a low-born woman for his mistress, and half the county knew it. Hermione did what nine out of ten high-spirited women would have done—she made a scene (only, however, before her husband and his mother), and so violent was she that she nearly died of the excitement afterward, and the hope that Lady Cornelia had entertained of her son being reclaimed by the softening influence of fatherhood was doomed to disappointment.

Hermione, who had intended to rush from her husband's roof forever, was prevented doing so by severe illness, the result of her violent emotion, and, for some weeks afterward, lay almost at death's door. As she gradually returned to convalescence, she had plenty of time for reflection, and ultimately drew out a very sensible line of conduct for herself. Her first wild hatred of Giles had subsided—in time it would grow to contemptuous indifference if she resolutely refused to think of her wrongs. As to happiness in married life, that *mirage* had passed away forever; better sooner than later, perhaps; and it only remained for her to extract what pleasure she could from life. She had everything that wealth could buy: she was a perfectly free agent, a circumstance that made her the envy of most of her fair friends—she could surround herself with people she liked and who liked her. Lady Cornelia stood stanchly by her, showed her the greatest affection and attention, and, indeed, the two women really came to like each other. After the season, she went abroad: in the autumn she visited at country-houses; the air at Orange Court was too strong for her—she had no appetite, and felt ill there. It was unfortunate—yes, very; it was such a charming place, and her husband was so devoted to it; but one cannot live in a place where one always has a headache.

Nearly three years elapsed before Hermione bethought her of once more visiting her country residence. By this time she was so perfectly indifferent to Giles Fane that nothing he might do could move any stronger emotion than contempt in her breast. They had met periodically, at Lady Cornelia's earnest entreaty, for the sake of keeping society hoodwinked, and they were quite civil to each other before people. Alone, they never ex-

changed a syllable. It came to be a matter of course that Hermione spent the month of August at Orange Court, when her husband absented himself. She entertained royally whilst there, but she and her party had to leave before the first of September, when Mr. Fane took possession with his friends. Hermione saw no reason why she should not have some benefit out of her lovely country-seat. Nothing hurt her now, not even seeing the reigning sultana in church with a sturdy boy on each side of her. That lady seldom attended divine service unless the legitimate wife was at the Court.

Hermione had no other feeling for Giles now than contempt. When a woman thoroughly despises her husband, he can no longer wound or annoy her, unless he tries to fetter her actions or refuses to give her money. Giles Fane in these particulars was a model husband. He never asked a question, nor grumbled at a bill, and Hermione certainly spent money very freely. It is possible that Giles, goaded on by the jealousy of his mistress, might have been induced to annoy his wife, had she not been so strongly backed up by his mother; but he felt he was no match for the two. All he wanted was peace and quietness, which, however, he was far from enjoying, as the second Mrs. Fane had a fierce, turbulent spirit. Still he remained devotedly attached to her, in spite of the scenes to which she not unfrequently treated him. He went up to town for a fortnight in the season for the Derby and Ascot, but though he was by way of staying at the house in Grosvenor Place, it saw very little of him. The races, the horse-show in the daytime, music-halls in the evening, were his amusements. The world said he was a vulgar, uninteresting young man, and would have pitied Hermione had she offered herself as a candidate for its sympathy. But Hermione knew better. *Never*, how great soe'er your sorrows, ask the world's pity! Pity means contempt. It may at first offer you a languid sympathy, and will then hasten to turn its back upon you. Present a smiling face, seem to be fortunate and happy, though you may be racked with misery, and it will seek you and smile upon you.

Hermione smiled, and society envied and fawned upon her. Her smiles were natural enough now; she turned everything into jest and was only cynical upon one subject—happy marriages. She did not tell Vanessa to her face that neither her happiness nor her love would last, but she told the colonel so, and laughed at him when he doubted her.

Vanessa was puzzled about Mrs. Fane's relations with her husband. She did not quite know the real story, because Colonel Dallas was not able to tell it her, and her husband did not know it. Vanessa had not been brought up in the fashionable world, and her ears were very sensitive indeed, and would have burned with shame had many things that were common talk been poured into them, and the colonel was the last man in the world to offend modesty. Many of her new acquaintances were amused and surprised at her innocence, but they respected it as *gentlemen* invariably do. Men always take their cue from the women.

they are talking to—it is very rare to find one who wantonly and brutally offends a modest woman.

Late one afternoon toward the end of the season, Vanessa and Mrs. Fane were drinking tea in the boudoir of the latter—they had been driving together, and Vanessa's victoria was presently to fetch her. They were conversing with eager interest about a fancy dress ball to be given by a fashionable lady, which was to be a *bal masque* until supper-time, when every one would have to doff mask and domino. Both ladies had received invitations, and were discussing their costumes with exceeding animation.

"I rather doubt its success," says Mrs. Fane. "Not one English woman in twenty could conceal her identity; not one in five hundred disguise her voice. It is capital fun abroad, where every one enters into the spirit of the thing. I have often completely mystified people who knew me quite well. I shall speak nothing but French, or perhaps broken English, for Englishmen are so dreadfully uneducated that very few understand French."

"I am sure I could not deceive any one," replies Vanessa, "although I should immensely like to."

"Of course not," laughs Mrs. Fane. "You are too tall, too majestic; but a little person like myself can flit about like a gnat, buzz, sting, and be off again in a second. No, my dear, your triumph will be later, when you remove your mask and domino."

At this moment the door opens and admits Lord Ravenhold.

"Am I horribly *de trop*?" he asks, having greeted Vanessa and brushed his sister's curly head with his mustache. "Were you slaying your thousands or inventing a new fashion? I know it is worse to interrupt two bosom friends than two lovers."

"We will forgive you, as you don't offend very often," laughs Hermione. "You are a perfect stranger, dear boy. Ring for a brandy-and-soda."

"No," shaking his head. "I only want refreshment for the mind." And he sinks into a chair beside Vanessa.

"Tell us some news," says Hermione, settling herself to listen.

"News! There never is any in hot weather. Besides, I have hardly seen a member of your sex for two days."

"What has that to do with it?" asks Hermione. "Have you not been to your clubs?"

"I should not be likely to pick up any there," answers her brother. "The only place where I ever hear news or scandal is in a lady's drawing-room."

"What a monstrous story!" laughs Mrs. Fane. "Well, we need not interrupt our conversation for you. We were talking of clothes, of course. *Apropos*, what are you going as? Edgar Ravenswood or Faust? or one of the parts suited to a handsome young man?"

"On the contrary," returns Lord Ravenhold, "I am undecided between Quasimodo and *L'Homme qui rit*. The latter, I think, would be a novelty."

"Don't be a goose, Gerard. But really, seriously?"

"I don't think I shall go at all. Fancy a domino and mask in July! I should die of the heat."

"What character has Mildred chosen?" inquires Mrs. Fane.

"I don't know, I am sure," he replies, mendaciously, having just come from quarreling with her upon the very subject.

"If you please, ma'am, the dressmaker is here" announces the butler at this juncture.

"Oh, I *must* see her!" cries Hermione, jumping up. "Will it be indiscreet to leave you two together? Do not make love to her, Gerard. You will only waste your time."

Her parting shaft causes no embarrassment to either; they smile; each has, or thinks he has, a permanent guest in his heart.

"My sister has a very light opinion of me," remarks Ravenhold, as the door closes upon her. "She thinks I am bound to make love to every woman I meet. But"—looking at Vanessa with a certain degree of earnestness—"I am the most faithful, the most constant fellow in the world, and though I am not such a barbarian as to be insensible to the charms of a beautiful woman, they are powerless to shake my allegiance."

If we assert a thing, Fate always takes care to convict us of falsehood the next moment; and even as he speaks, Lord Ravenhold becomes aware for the first time how very lovely Mrs. Brandon is, and what a very strong temptation to a man's fealty it would be to see much of her. What a skin! What exquisitely colored eyes!—so brilliant, yet so soft. What a mouth! Lady Mildred is *piquante*, but the details of her face will not bear scrutiny, and her complexion is undoubtedly her worst point. At home in her judiciously darkened rooms one does not notice this defect, but there are cross-lights and side-lights in other people's houses. Mrs. Brandon's face is clear and smiling like a summer's day. Could it ever be stormy and clouded with anger? Could her eyes ever dart fiendish glances, her mouth wax shrewish, her nose grow red after crying, like Mildred's?

"One *can* only love one person at a time," returns Vanessa, with a frank smile. "And that makes one perfectly indifferent to every one else, as you say, except just in a friendly way."

After Lord Ravenhold's recent observation, it is utterly unreasonable that he should feel the smallest shadow of pique at Mrs. Brandon's words. All the same he does.

"Love is rather disappointing, don't you think?" he remarks, with a shade of melancholy that is not unbecoming to him.

"No," says Vanessa, smiling. "I do not think so at all." She is half minded to tell him that, if he were properly and legitimately in love, he would find it an eminently satisfactory state, but that people cannot expect to be happy when they are transgressing laws social and divine. As if he had some intuition of her thoughts, Ravenhold says, plaintively:

"Fate is always playing at cross-purposes, and throwing the wrong people together or the right ones too late."

Vanessa gives a little deprecatory shake of her head. She does not want to be hard upon him, because he is so good-looking, and she cannot help feeling interested in him; but she cannot assent to rank blasphemy. Is not she a living instance of the falseness of his assertion?

"Yes," he pursues, sighing, "I know. You are an exception. Well, it is very nice for you and *awfully* nice for him. By the way, I have never seen your husband.

"'Twain halves of a perfect heart made one.'

I should very much like to see what the other half is like."

"Come and see us," says Vanessa, cordially; "my husband will be delighted to know you."

It occurs to Lord Ravenhold that a visit of ceremony for the purpose of seeing Mr. Brandon will be dull work.

"After all," he says, "I think I would rather come and see you when he is not there. The sight of too much happiness might make me envious and uncomfortable."

Now Vanessa, although she has made great strides toward becoming a fashionable woman, has not yet taken to receiving men *tete-a-tete*, always excepting the colonel. So she looks a little bit embarrassed and says, rather shyly:

"Perhaps you would come with Mrs. Fane some day."

"Is Mr. Brandon jealous?" asked Ravenhold, unable to grasp the idea of a woman in these days thinking it *inconvenient* to entertain a man alone in her drawing-room.

"Jealous!" echoes Vanessa, laughing. "No, indeed."

"Ah, then you think I should bore you?"

"No, no," cries Vanessa, quite distressed.

"Then," observes Lord Ravenhold, gently but firmly, "I shall come and see you by myself when I think Mr. Brandon is out. You know you can always say 'not at home,' if you don't want to see me."

He is piqued. As a rule when he proposes to call upon a woman, she seems pleased and flattered—not one has ever made the smallest reference to Mrs. Grundy.

Here Mrs. Fane comes tripping in.

"Has the time seemed long?" she says, archly. "What have you been talking about?"

"I was proposing," answers Ravenhold, deliberately, "to do myself the honor of calling on Mrs. Brandon, and she has given me to understand, in the kindest and politest way possible, that she would prefer my staying away."

"Oh, Lord Ravenhold!" cries Vanessa, blushing and looking unhappy.

"Quite right, my dear," laughs Hermione. "Keep the serpent out of Eden as long as you can! This dear boy," laying a caressing hand on his head, "does not look much like a serpent, but he is one, and a very dangerous one too."

"No wonder," says Ravenhold, "if that is the strain in which you speak of me to Mrs. Brandon, that she thinks me not sufficiently respectable to be included in her visiting list."

CHAPTER XV.

LORD RAVENHOLD has put Vanessa into her carriage and has returned to his sister's boudoir.

"Gerard," says Hermione, half laughing, "I will not have this. You are to leave Mrs. Brandon quite alone."

"You flatter me!" replies Ravenhold. "Am I dangerous even to the peace of mind of a lady who is quite wrapped up in her husband?"

"Being your sister, I am of course unable to estimate your attractions at their full value," answers Mrs. Vane. "But there is no doubt," affectionately, "that you are a very good-looking young man, and there is no doubt," with a little sigh, "that when you take a fancy to a woman, she invariably reciprocates."

"Then," says Ravenhold, laughing, "it will be a very good corrective to my vanity—especially as I have a little sister who does her best to foster it—to be snubbed by a pretty woman as I have been to-day."

"Did she snub you?" asks Hermione, with an interested air.

"Most emphatically. She gave me distinctly to understand that she did not want me to call unless a third person was present."

"She has been brought up in the country, you know," responds Hermione, "and is not used to our manners and customs. All the same, dear boy, do *not* call. Leave her quite alone. She is very happy, and, besides, Uncle Charlie would not like it."

"Has Uncle Charlie any particular right or vested interest in Mrs. Brandon, pray?"

"Yes," laughs Hermione—"the right of the finder."

"Tell me, Hermy," says her brother, "what sort of fellow is this Brandon, who has succeeded in awakening such an immense devotion in his wife's lovely bosom?"

"He is a very nice, quiet, gentlemanlike, middle-aged man," replies Mrs. Fane.

Ravenhold repeats her words thoughtfully.

"A very nice, quiet, gentlemanlike, middle-aged man! H'm! That is hardly the description of a being capable of inspiring so tremendous a passion."

"It is quite true all the same."

"The description or the passion?"

"Both."

After a moment's silence, Ravenhold speaks with much more energy than he has done hitherto.

"You know it can't last."

"Why not?"

"It's on the face of it. If he's a quiet, middle-aged man, and she is, as she is, a gloriously beautiful woman, with every man who comes near making up with her, why, of course he'll go to the wall."

"*Je n'y vois pas la necessite*," remarks Hermione, dryly. "It is not always the good-looking young men who have all the cakes and ale of female affection. They are generally too selfish and too much taken up with themselves to inspire a lasting attachment."

"That is reserved for the nice, quiet, middle-aged men?" suggests Ravenhold, and Mrs. Fane nods assent.

"Gerard," says his sister, after a minute's silence.

"Well, my dear?"

"Don't be too civil to Mrs. Brandon before Mildred. I should be extremely sorry for Vanessa to have her for an enemy."

Ravenhold gives rather a petulant shrug.

"Really, Hermy, I think you are carrying a joke a little too far."

"It is not a joke."

"As for Mildred and myself," he proceeds, "we are very good friends——"

"Yes, I know," interrupts Hermione, dryly. "Well, then, you had better keep so."

"Good-bye," says her brother, rising abruptly.

"Don't be cross, dear boy," utters Hermione, in a caressing tone.

"I am not in the least cross," he replies.

"All right," kissing him. "And, to please me, *leave Mrs. Brandon quite alone.*"

Lord Ravenhold frowns distinctly.

"I think you are really silly," he says, going.

"I dare say I am," she answers good-humoredly.

Two nights later Mrs. Brandon and Lord Ravenhold meet at a ball. Lady Mildred is also there. The two latter are not yet quite reconciled; there has been rather a serious breach between them, and Ravenhold has not been so keen about making it up this time as is his wont. The quick perceptions of Lady Mildred have made her aware of this, and she, being proud, hangs back more resolutely in consequence. Her ladyship is of a fiercely jealous disposition. When she twice sees Ravenhold waltzing with Mrs. Brandon, and employing that caressing manner to her which it is his wont to use toward all pretty women when his thoughts are not completely centered on one, a sudden rage and hatred against Vanessa possess her soul. She is violent, headstrong, passionate, unjust. When once her jealousy is roused, neither prudence nor common sense have any control over her. And she loves Lord Ravenhold in a reckless, furious sort of way, and will not tolerate any thought of a rival.

Mrs. Fane had spoken wisely and well when she counseled her brother against showing any attention to Mrs. Brandon in Lady Mildred's presence. Perhaps, however, it would have been better if she had refrained from cautioning him, for Ravenhold was a little perverse, and opposition invariably spurred him on, particularly where a woman was concerned. I am not sure that this was a peculiarity of his lordship's disposition alone; I rather fancy it is about the commonest trait that we inherit from our first parents; the one which we know was the cause of their fall.

After dancing with Mrs. Brandon once, Lord Ravenhold had gone to Lady Mildred's side; she received him with her head in the air, made one or two cutting and insolent remarks, and turned her back upon him. He, not to be behindhand in spirit, returned at once to Vanessa, and, under the very eyes of Lady Mildred, petitioned eagerly for another waltz. He knew and felt that he was doing exactly what his sister had warned him

against, making Lady Mildred Vanessa's enemy, and he felt rather guilty and perturbed. but how was he to blame? Besides, after all, he said to himself, Mrs. Brandon did not care two straws about him or any one else except her husband, so what harm could it do?

Vanessa was pleased to dance with him; he waltzed perfectly; he was very good-looking; and, greatest recommendation of all, he was nephew to Colonel Dallas and brother to Mrs. Fane.

Mr. Brandon was at the ball, and Ravenhold asked to be introduced to him. They had entered into some conversation, the younger man having a considerable curiosity to arrive at the cause of Mrs. Brandon's devotion to her husband. After some chat, he was still unable to grasp the reason. Brandon was exactly what Hermione had described him—a nice, quiet, gentlemanlike, middle-aged man; but were those qualities sufficient to inspire such a very ardent affection in the breast of a lovely young woman?

Lord Ravenhold proposed to Mr. Brandon that he and his wife should dine with him at Hurlingham on the Sunday following. He would drive them down on his coach. Brandon replied that it would give them both great pleasure. Ravenhold was a little surprised when, in dancing with Mrs. Brandon for the third time that evening, he informed her of the pleasure he was anticipating that she turned rosy red, betrayed considerable confusion, and, without giving any definite reason, said she was afraid they would not be able to accept his very kind invitation. He could not press her for the reason, as she gave none—she pleaded no previous engagement, and Ravenhold felt decidedly piqued. After all, he thought, with a sudden revulsion of feeling, it was scarcely worth while quarreling *a l'outrance* with Milly for a woman who did not seem to care either for his company or his attentions. So he went back to Lady Mildred, bent on propitiating her. But by this time she was beyond his power of recall. She did not, however, turn her back upon him as she had done before—she was so furious that only one idea possessed her, which was to have it out with him.

"Will you dance this with me?" he whispered, in his softest voice, and, without answering him, she put her hand on his arm. Her anger was such that she could scarcely bear to touch him. The fingers that rested on his arm writhed with a feeling of antagonism. Light as her touch was, she led him by her determination of purpose to the door, which was just where he did not want to go. He had no desire for a *tete-a-tete* at this moment; at all events until a waltz had exercised a beneficial effect upon her ladyship's nerves and temper.

"Let us stay and have one turn," he whispered, persuasively; but without answering him, she pressed her lips tighter together, and continued her march toward the door.

Every considerate hostess provides her guests with opportunities for *solitudes a deux*; to-night there were several charming recesses and bowers arranged for the purpose. To one of these the lady, reversing the order of things, hurried her lover, but little thought or intention of love-making was there on the part

of either. It was a charming alcove dimly lighted, filled with sweet-scented flowers. Maybe by daylight it was a nook of the leads over the billiard-room, the *rendezvous* of feline combatants, but to-night it was a bower stolen from Paradise. The pair had not time to exchange a word before the sound of pursuing footsteps was heard, and a voice cried:

"Lady Mildred! Lady Mildred! this is our waltz!"

And a good-looking, eager young face was thrust into Paradise. It was certainly not the new-comer who was the serpent—that role was reserved for the lady.

"I am not going to dance," she replied, curtly.

"Oh, come, I say, that's not fair!" cried her promised partner.

"You don't think I'm going to let you off like that!"

Here Ravenhold made a slight movement as though to escape, which Lady Mildred detected.

"Where are you going, Lord Ravenhold?" she exclaimed, in a tone the anger of which was very indifferently repressed. Then, turning to the other man, she said, rudely, "Don't you understand? I'm not going to dance this."

Bon sang ne peut mentir is no truer than any other old saying. I think we most of us know how *bon sang* can *mentir* on occasion. Good blood or bad when at boiling-point shows itself much in the same manner.

Lord Edward flushes crimson, makes his bow in silence, and retires.

Before five minutes are over, half the company are made aware by him that Ravenhold and Lady Mildred are having the devil's own row, and that she looks simply like a fiend. It is unwise to snub any one. You may do a man a downright injury without incurring half so much hatred from him as by only inflicting a small slight.

Left to themselves, Lord Ravenhold and Lady Mildred preserve a temporary silence. She has a choking sensation in her throat; her nerves are strung to their highest pitch; her fingers are literally *crisped*. She is full of savage instincts—even the repressive social training of twenty-five years is scarcely able to restrain her from breaking out as a Billingsgate fish-wife might. After all, perhaps those poor women are not greater vixens than others—how did they get their evil reputation?

To do her justice, Lady Mildred is trying very hard to keep her furious passion in leash; she knows pretty well that, once she lets her tongue loose, she will not have the least control over it; its mad desire to sting and wound *will* be gratified. Only the profile of Ravenhold's handsome, sulky face is turned to her—he is calmly contemplating an orchid, and shows no intention of breaking the silence. He feels disgusted—he does not care whether his companion is angry or pleased, except in so far as he is being made uncomfortable by her ill humor. He wonders what on earth he ever saw in her; he is congratulating himself on the prospect of quarreling with her, although he has an uneasy suspicion that she is rather a dangerous person to quarrel with. Nothing is more infuriating to an angry person

than silence: he wants a peg to hang the cloak of his wrath upon, and without speech from the adversary he is pegless.

Literally, Lady Mildred does not know how to uncork the vials of her wrath. She wants to dash them, vial and all, in Lord Ravenhold's face. When at last she does speak, her voice is hoarse—her heart beats like a sledge-hammer. The tone which she tries to make disdainful is only spitefully bitter.

"I congratulate you upon your latest conquest," she says.

Ravenhold continues to contemplate the orchid without replying. This is unwise on his part. Nothing he could say could stop the torrent of her wrath, but silence enrages her more than any speech could do, because the mere fact of his not trying to appease her proves his indifference. There are many women, and men, too, who, when angry, become utterly indifferent to truth, justice, or sense. One wild desire animates them—to hurt the foe; how, it matters not.

"Such a conquest, too!" pursues Lady Mildred, after a moment's pause. "A creature picked up no one knows where, with her painted eyes and vulgar beauty airs. Upon my word, I rather wonder at your sister foisting your uncle's mistress upon society."

Perhaps the reader ought to have it explained to him that Lady Mildred is speaking of Mrs. Brandon, whom he may not recognize by her ladyship's description. At all events, she succeeds in her purpose, for she gets what, in the language of the day, is termed a "rise" out of Lord Ravenhold.

"May I ask of whom you are speaking?" he asks in tones of ice, although dangerous scintillations are gathering in his eyes.

Lady Mildred is pleased at having scored a point.

"Need you ask?" she says. "There is only one person here to whom, as far as I know, the description at all applies."

"There are plenty of women here with painted eyes," rejoins Lord Ravenhold, looking her cruelly and for the first time in the face. This time he scores.

"There may be some with vulgar beauty airs—nothing is more odious—I have not remarked them, having been in the society of a charming and beautiful lady, whom no one could accuse of anything so detestable, but when you come to the third point, my uncle's mistress, I confess you baffle me."

"I mean Mrs. Brandon," retorts Lady Mildred, too angry to fence; "if *you* don't know it, every one else does."

Lord Ravenhold retains his coolness, although he lost his temper some little time ago.

"Whoever invented that story is a liar," he observes, quite calmly. Lady Mildred can scarcely restrain herself from tearing him to pieces physically.

"How dare you!" she pants. "You coward!"

"It was you, then?"

"You are in love with her too," gasps Lady Mildred. "Do you think I have not seen it coming on from the very day she first went to Grosvenor Place? Do you think I have not seen how Hermione has been throwing her at you and playing into

your hands? You had better think twice. Do you fancy that I am a woman to be thrown over like you did Ella Scott? I don't advise you to dare me. I am quite capable of going to Frank this very night."

She is quite beside herself, and Ravenhold appreciates that in her present mood it will not be safe to dare her, as his anger tempts him very much to do.

"Milly," he says, trying to speak soothingly, but feeling the most excessive distaste and repugnance to her all the same, "what on earth has come to you? What are you driving at? Have you gone suddenly mad?"

"No," she answers, bitterly, "I am perfectly sane. You had better take care. I swear you shall have nothing to do with that woman. Do you hear? I swear it by every——"

"May I have one word with you, Lord Ravenhold?" says a voice. Then, as its owner becomes aware of Lady Mildred, it adds:

"I beg your pardon."

The voice is John Brandon's.

CHAPTER XVI.

LORD RAVENHOLD rises hurriedly and goes forward to speak to Mr. Brandon. His face has a slightly flushed, perturbed expression—he does not know how much the new-comer may have heard—it makes his naturally suave manner a trifle abrupt.

Brandon, however, knows and guesses nothing except that he has come awkwardly upon a *tete-a-tete*, always a disagreeable and stupid thing to do, and only to be repaired by seeming unconscious of one's misadventure. So he says quietly and naturally enough:

"We are just going, Lord Ravenhold. I wanted to tell you that I fear we shall not be able to dine at Hurlingham with you on Sunday. Thank you very much all the same for asking us."

"Oh, very well," replies Lord Ravenhold, rather shortly, more because he is embarrassed than from any feeling of offense.

Brandon imagines that his lordship is huffy about their declining his invitation after having accepted it.

"The truth is," he says, smiling, "that although my wife would like nothing so much, she has some little conscientious scruples about driving and dining out on Sunday, and I feel bound to respect them. You know she is a clergyman's daughter and has been very quietly brought up."

"Oh, of course, yes—certainly," replies Ravenhold, who at this moment is totally indifferent whether they dine or stay away, and feels no interest in any one's scruples or principles; feels nothing, in short, but a desire to get out of the place and escape Lady Mildred's ill humor and recriminations.

"You understand, I hope?" says Brandon, seeing that the young man's manner is not particularly genial.

"Quite. Certainly," answers Ravenhold. "Some other time

"I hope. Good-night," and he turns on his heel and rejoins Lady Mildred.

She, having been slightly frightened by Mr. Brandon's sudden appearance, and having had a minute in which to get the better of her rage, has calmed down. As Ravenhold stands in front of her, her passion for him and his good looks, which are not impaired by the cloud on his brow, go still further toward appeasing her.

"What did he want?" she asks.

"Not my blood—this time," returns the young man, coolly. "He is not yet aware of my infatuation for his wife."

Lady Mildred likes him in this mood. Rising, she lays one hand on his and says, rather humbly:

"Let us be friends, Gerard, shall we?"

"As you please," he answers, coldly. It is his turn now.

"Don't be angry!" she pleads. "It is only because I am so fond of you."

"You have an infernally unpleasant way of showing your fondness then, I must say," he retorts.

"Say you care for me," she whispers, fixing her dark eyes entreatingly on his face.

"I hate scenes," he utters, turning away from her.

"Only tell me that you don't care for that—that woman, and I won't make any more scenes."

"I suppose that in time I sha'n't be able to call my soul my own," exclaims Ravenhold, waxing angry as his wrath subsides.

"No," she whispers, coaxingly. "It shall be mine—all mine."

"Thank you," he retorts, dryly. "I would rather have it in my own keeping."

"Let us go and have one turn," says Lady Mildred. "I will throw my partner over for you."

"No, thanks. You have taken the dancing humor out of me."

"Then, perhaps," she remarks, the sparks of her anger, always quick to unite, blazing up again, "you will take me to my carriage?"

"Certainly," he answers, stiffly, giving her his arm.

But when they are half way down-stairs, they are met by Lady Mildred's promised partner, who is ascending, and as he claims her eagerly, she allows herself to be entreated, and goes back to the ballroom with him.

Lord Ravenhold betakes himself home, and as he is very wide awake, and not at all pleased in his mind, he lights a cigar and delivers himself over to reverie.

The events of the evening have, for the time, somewhat impaired the devotion to women, which is part of his religion. One has made him thoroughly uncomfortable by her ill temper and jealousy, and another, to whom he wished to be civil, has shown a very small appreciation of his efforts. When women are smiling and loving and devoted, they are angels; when they are the other thing—why—then they are the other thing too!

A few hours' sleep makes a change in his ideas. It is as

tounding now the morning light can metamorphose our views of life and people. When Lord Ravenhold wakes in the morning, he is more angry and disgusted with Lady Mildred than before, but he looks upon Mrs. Brandon in an extremely favorable light. She is a good and charming woman—devoted to her husband (the luckiest fellow in England, by Jove!), without a thought of flirting, and with nice, proper, religious ideas. Every woman ought to be religious. Instead of sneering at her for her old-fashioned notions about Sunday, he admires and respects her for them. He would like to know more of her and to be her friend, quite in a platonic way; he is sure that she would do him good.

"Uncle Charlie," he says, meeting the colonel in Pall Mall the same morning, "I want you to take me to call on Mrs. Brandon."

Colonel Dallas does not answer for a moment. Then he says, looking his nephew straight in the face:

"There are plenty of other women in the world, my dear boy."

Lord Ravenhold colors slightly, and is furious with himself for doing so.

"Upon my soul!" he exclaims, petulantly, "I think it's rather hard that I cannot express a wish to speak to a lady without——"

He does not finish his sentence.

"You know the family failing," returns the colonel, good-humoredly. "You don't mean any harm. *Mais c'est plus fort que vous.* Leave Adam and Eve in paradise; leave the poor man his ewe lamb."

"Is it you or Mr. Brandon who is the poor man?" asks Ravenhold, with thinly veiled sarcasm.

"Not me," laughs the colonel. "You know, hereditary disease generally skips one generation."

"Seriously, Uncle Charlie," pursues the young man, "Mrs. Brandon is a nice, good, charming woman; she wouldn't look at me, and I should be quite content to be her friend."

"No, no, leave her alone!" says the colonel, almost entreatingly.

"Oh, all right," returns Ravenhold, turning away in extreme displeasure.

Half an hour later he walks into his sister's boudoir.

"Gerard! what *have* you been doing?" she cries at sight of him. "Did I not beg and implore you to leave Mrs. Brandon alone, and not to make Milly her enemy?"

"You are pleased to speak in parables," says Ravenhold, stiffly, knowing all too well what she means.

"She has just been here in the most furious rage. We have all but quarreled. She said the most shameful and abominable things about Mrs. Brandon, and she will abuse her to every one she meets."

"Let her!" observes Lord Ravenhold, dryly. "I hardly fancy anything she can say will do Mrs. Brandon much harm."

"But it will!" persists Hermione. "People are only too de-

lighted to believe harm of any one, especially of a pretty woman. And Milly has a great deal of social influence. But, now, what *did* you do last night to make her so angry? Did you dance much with Mrs. Brandon?"

"Once or twice."

"Was it once or twice?"

"I don't know. Suppose," defiantly, "it was three times?"

"Oh, then I should understand at once," remarks Hermione, dryly. "And after I begged and implored you so to leave her alone!"

"What is there in dancing three times with a woman?" cries Ravenhold, angrily. "I often dance four and five times with one."

"I dare say," returns Hermione. "But that is some one with whom, for the moment, you are very much *eppris*. Gerard," looking up at him, "I am afraid you are very fickle. A little while ago you had no eyes for any one but Milly."

"You seem to forget that she has a husband," retorts Ravenhold.

"So did you, then," says Hermione.

"She is very good company, and you know perfectly well, Hermyn, that one is driven to it if one is a wretched devil who happens to be worth marrying. You know that I dare not say a civil word to a girl without her father or mother being at me, and those infernal papers having a paragraph about it."

"I have nothing to say about you and Milly. Did I ever interfere by look or word? But Mrs. Brandon is different, and I do not want her happiness to be disturbed. Heaven knows!" bitterly, "there are few enough happy marriages."

"Upon my word," says Lord Ravenhold, "I ought to feel flattered by your all thinking that I have only to hold up my finger to the most beautiful woman in London. She is a nice, good woman, and I want to be friends with her. Make your mind easy—she has not one idea beyond her husband."

"I don't believe in friendship between a handsome young man and a beautiful woman. And you can't help it, Gerard! it's in your blood—the moment you want to be civil to a woman, you begin to make love to her without even knowing it. Now I want you to oblige me. You were to have dined here to-morrow night."

"I am to dine here."

"The Brandons are coming. Now, to please me, stop away."

"You are very kind and hospitable. I have refused five other invitations, and now you want to turn me loose without any dinner at all."

"Don't come, there's a dear boy!"

Lord Ravenhold gets very angry, and does not attempt to conceal his ill humor. He leaves Grosvenor Place in wrath.

When I say that after this he begins to think very seriously about Mrs. Brandon and all her charms and graces, no one who knows anything of the world or human nature will be surprised. Opposition in love is to most men (and women too) what the magnet is to the needle. Two mornings later, Lord Raven-

hold, sauntering down the shady side of the park, espies his sister and Mrs. Brandon sitting together. On Hermione's left is the man who is her greatest friend—a man whom the world would once have liked to whisper scandal about in connection with her, only that he and she had tact and courage enough to nip all cause for such whisperings in the bud. The seat beside Vanessa is vacant, and Ravenhold, his heart beating a trifle faster, and his eyes darting a glance of defiance at his sister, takes swift possession of it.

Mrs. Fane yields to the inevitable—she has, besides, a good deal to say to her companion, so Ravenhold and Vanessa are left to their own devices. They begin by talking about the ball at which they met two nights previously. She found it charming, and praises the floor, the music, the decorations, the flowers with enthusiasm. He, on the contrary, has little good to say of it; but then, in his mind, it is associated with very disagreeable recollections.

"Perhaps," he says, "it was the frightful snub you gave me which prevented my finding it pleasant."

"Snub!" Vanessa echoes his word, and her great eyes look troubled and distressed.

"Did you really think me a profane Sabbath-breaking wretch for proposing to drive you out to dine on Sunday, or was it a little excuse to get off dining with me at all?"

Vanessa looks positively unhappy.

"Oh, Lord Ravenhold, why do you say that?" she exclaims. "You are not serious—you do not really believe it? There is nothing in the world I should have enjoyed so much."

"Then you really think it wrong to go 'pleasuring' on a Sunday? Which is it that shocks you most—the dining or the driving?"

He does not say it in a bantering tone, as the words seem to imply, but looks at her quite seriously.

"I am not shocked at either," she answers, hastily. "I do not think anything wrong for other people; it is only that I have not been accustomed to it myself."

"Then some week-day you might be induced to come?"

"I should like it better than anything," she answers, with unmistakable sincerity.

"How would next Tuesday suit you?"

"We are going to a ball, but we have no dinner engagement."

"I will bring you back in time to dress. Hermy, speaking across Vanessa to his sister, "will you come down and dine at Hurlingham on Tuesday? And you, Anson?" to her neighbor.

Mrs. Fane hesitates.

"It would be very pleasant," Mr. Anson says, quietly. And that turns the balances in Mrs. Fane's mind. After all, she is not her brother's keeper nor Mrs. Brandon's."

"And we will ask Uncle Charlie," adds Ravenhold.

"Oh, do!" exclaims Vanessa, so eagerly that the young man feels half inclined to be jealous.

"Talk of one's uncle," cries Mrs. Fane, "and there he is."

Colonel Dallas comes up to them. He is not looking quite so beaming as usual; as his eye rests on the two couples, he feels a sensation which is the reverse of agreeable. Both nephew and niece perfectly understand the reason of his clouded brow, but Vanessa, being quite innocent and unconscious, does not even remark it. She is surprised that the colonel does not jump at the thought of making one of this delightful party; indeed, he seems more inclined to excuse himself than to accept.

"But you must come, indeed you must," pleads Vanessa, with earnest entreaty beaming from her eyes. "It would not be half so nice without you."

"Does she want me to make sixth and take her husband off?" whispers a suspicious demon in the colonel's ear, but her lovely face is so candid and sincere that he acquits her at once.

Lord Ravenhold does not see Mrs. Brandon again until the following Tuesday. He writes her a pretty little note of reminder, and she replies to it. Like a child she watches the weather eagerly, and is rejoiced when the day dawns hot and fair. Ravenhold is to come first to Bryanston Square, and then to pick up the rest of the party at Grosvenor Place.

When Vanessa is seated behind the four fine chestnuts and beside her handsome young jehu, she is so happy and delighted that her fair face seems almost to ripple over with joy. At every moment she turns to claim her husband's sympathy with her pleasure by a smile or a few glad words, and his honest heart beats responsively to her contentment. His lordship, conscious that he is perfectly turned out, and that the most beautiful woman in London is beside him, and pleased to be there, is radiant. Perhaps he looks, as a man envious of him says to another as they go by, as if he fancied himself uncommonly. But, in reality, it is Mrs. Brandon whom he fancies. Pray Heaven they may not meet Lady Mildred! Of course they do; the coach and her barouche stand side by side for a minute at the pleasant and convenient little crossing at Hyde Park Corner. She has seen them coming, and a madness of anger possesses her. But she quietly takes her Court Guide from the opposite seat and appears calmly intent upon searching for an address.

Ravenhold does not even know that she has seen them. But a coach-and-four is a very good target for the eye, especially when it is right across the road in front of you.

"There is Lady Mildred!" exclaims Vanessa, and she bends a little forward, wishing to catch that lady's eye, not, you may be sure, from any triumphant feeling of rivalry. She is her husband's and he is hers; other women's husbands and lovers are safe from her. The meeting is unlucky. It was only last Sunday that Ravenhold had made his peace with Lady Mildred and given her his word of honor, backed by the strongest asseverations, that she was the only woman in the world for him, and that, although he thought Mrs. Brandon good-looking, his desires and intentions went no further. Hermione and Mr. Anson come out to join the party in excellent spirits. The colonel is not in the same form as the others, but then he sits facing the rooms, which is not enlivening, and his reflections are not alto-

gether of a pleasant nature. He has been devoted to Vanessa and, up to this moment, she alone of all his pretty acquaintances has never shunted him for another member of his sex. He has always been her flattered, *feted* colonel, but now that Ravenhold has come upon the scene with his good looks, his coach, and his numerous other adjuncts, there is no question that he is "out of it." After all, he has only himself to thank; he has brought her into this set, where but for him she certainly would not be now. He is a fool for his pains, and God alone knows whether anything worse may come of it."

Thus the colonel to himself, as they sweep down Queen's Gate and along the narrow and unsavory streets which lead to what seems paradise to Vanessa, but presents itself in quite a different shape to our soliloquist.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE dinner is a cheery one. Lord Ravenhold is assiduous in his attentions to his fair guest. Mr. Anson and Mrs. Fane are occupied with each other, and Colonel Dallas, who has too much good taste and breeding to allow himself to be a *trouble-fet*, talks to the husband with an excellent grace, and consoles himself with his dinner, to which he is by no means indifferent. Although both he and Ravenhold are perfectly aware of the attachment between Roland Anson and Hermione, it gives neither any disquietude—they have had ample proof before now of the man's honor and the woman's rectitude of principle. Roland Anson is one of the few men capable of loving a woman better than himself.

He is tall, rather thin, about thirty-five years of age, with a grave manner, an unmistakable *cachet* of breeding, and dark-gray eyes that have a very soft and kindly expression; and something more when they rest on Hermione. He loves and admires her more than any other woman in the world; she is like some bright little fairy to him, and he has the deepest, tenderest compassion for her woes and wrongs, which he perhaps knows more about than any other living being. There was a time when her natural protectors and guardians (not including Mr. Fane) had felt some uneasiness about this intimacy, but experience has caused that to wear off, and they accepted and liked Roland Anson as a friend of the family and a man to be trusted.

Something of Ravenhold's habitually caressing manner to pretty women is creeping into his demeanor to Vanessa—he is conscious of it himself, and pauses, once now and again, to look over at her husband, who, however, shows not the smallest symptom of jealousy. After dinner, the host proposes an adjournment to the garden, and again the three couples pair off. It would be perfectly easy for Brandon to keep near his wife—who has not the smallest desire to elude him, and, of the two, would rather stroll about with him, hanging lovingly on his arm, than with Ravenhold; but he is as sure and confident of her now as last year he was doubting and diffident. The best-looking, best-bred men in London have surrounded and flattered

her, and she loves him as much and more than ever, and has not one look or word of coquetry or encouragement for any other man. John Brandon is not one to go out of his way to meet unpleasant things, and he is perfectly unsuspecting. Naturally Ravenhold, as well as any other young fellow, admired his wife—why not? but he is furthest from giving him credit for dishonorable or unworthy attentions. Nor has Ravenhold any such—he would have instantly wanted the blood of the man who dared to hint such a thing, but he has a way, like a good many other handsome, spoiled boys, of letting himself drift, and then lamenting, as the colonel said, that it was *plus fort que lui*. So, in spite of himself (or more truly because he makes no effort over himself), as he and Vanessa stroll over the turf and look at the river, his eyes dwell longer on her and his voice grows softer and more caressing. But she, only having one man's image in her heart, and no room there for another, is not at all embarrassed or uneasy, but talks away gayly and frankly to him; too gayly, according to his idea, as he is rather plaintively and sentimentally inclined.

Now they are sitting on a bench on the greensward under the great, starlit canopy of the dark-blue sky. It is quite light enough for each to see the expression of the other's face.

"How happy you seem!" says Ravenhold, almost enviously, and he heaves a deep, deep sigh, as though such happiness were rather displeasing to him.

"I *am* happy," she answers, with a low, contented laugh. "What a good thing it is to be happy—very happy!"

"Have you never been unhappy?" he asks, rather mournfully.

"Never. Never in my life."

"I did not know there was any one in the world who could make such a boast as that," utters Ravenhold.

"But you?" says Vanessa, gayly. "You do not give me the idea of an unhappy person, Lord Ravenhold."

"One does not wear one's heart upon one's sleeve," he answers. "But if one is always tormented by a want that cannot be satisfied, do you think one can be happy?"

Vanessa imagines that he is thinking of Lady Mildred; that his words apply to her. She likes him too much to want to be his censor, but she is shocked at the thought of unlawful passion.

"If one cannot have a thing," she answers, looking down at the turf beneath their feet whilst his eyes are fixed on her face. "ought one not try to do without it?"

"No," he says, emphatically, seeing that she is interpreting him wrongly. "Not if it is a thing that it is right and fair to want, not if one is obeying the first law of nature by wanting it."

Vanessa looks up at him a little startled. Having a rooted idea that it is Lady Mildred whom he wants, she does not understand his speech.

"To my mind there is only one thing in the world worth having," utters Ravenhold, in a low voice but with intense earnest-

ness, whilst he keeps his eyes fixed on the lovely face which it seems to him might crown the hopes and desires of the most fastidious man living. "That is love: ardent, passionate love; not a mere paltry fancy which soon subsides into an easy-going liking or else into indifference, but a love that occupies every moment of one's life, that keeps every nerve full strung: a love that is heaven or hell, but, as I would have it, heaven."

She understands him, his words touch a chord in her heart—that, in the plenitude of her youth and passion, is what she too craves. Deeply as she loves her husband, she has already felt bitter disappointment at the fading of his passion, whilst hers has rather increased. No matter that his love is truer, faithfuller than ever, it is not the love she desires; not the love she had last year.

She leans her head slightly back, and, looking wistfully at the spangled sky, says, in a dreamy voice:

"Then one would be too happy," and, catching the infection from her companion, she heaves a long sigh. A moment's silence, then Ravenhold says:

"Heart-hunger has become a cant phrase, but it is a true one; it expresses a real feeling. How happy people must be who either do not know what it means, or," looking still at her, "who, feeling it, can have it satisfied!"

He is trying to probe her to discover whether her heart is really as satisfied as it seems to be.

Vanessa's thoughts take a sudden turn away from herself, and she says, bringing her eyes and thoughts down from the skies and fixing them on him:

"Why do you not love, then? Surely you have only to ask and have!" and she gives him a friendly flattering little smile. "There are so many pretty, charming girls in society who ought to come up to your ideal."

"Don't you see," he utters, "that it is just there the hardship lies? I don't like girls very much," with a little disdainful curl of the upper lip, "but if I did like one, how could I know that she cared for me, or that she would fulfill my want or answer to my longing? She would be pretty sure to pretend to like me, unless a bigger swell was by; she would smile and be good-tempered, and if she saw it was necessary, would feign to be as fond and loving as propriety permitted; whatever tune I piped she would dance to, *until* she had got me. And, afterward, I should perhaps find her a shrew or an icicle, who, whilst I was dying for love and sympathy, would be thinking about her frocks or yawning, or counting the stones in her rings and showing me that I bored her unutterably. Men who have the misfortune to possess a title have no chance of knowing if they are loved for their own sakes."

It pleases Vanessa to treat her friend's brother in a matronly, rather patronizing manner.

"Fancy," she says, smiling, "a handsome and charming young man being so diffident about himself!"

"You are very good to say anything so kind," he returns, with a slight accent of disappointment.

There is nothing so provoking to a man as a woman who will be friendly and sisterly when he does not demand that sort of interest from her.

"You have no sister, have you?" he asks, presently.

"No, I am an only child."

"I wish you would find me some one to love," he says, coming a little nearer to her. "Tell me, have you no friend who you think would answer to my ideal?"

Vanessa muses. Naturally her thoughts fly first to the friends of her girlhood, Edith and Mabel. But Edith's heart is already engaged, and Mabel would certainly not suit Lord Ravenhold, who looks for both passion and sympathy.

"Do you think," he asks, softly, "that marriage is really a good thing? Is one happier married?" and she answers without a moment's hesitation:

"Oh, much, *much* happier!"

Ravenhold leans back and sighs again. It does seem rather hard luck that with his youth, his ardor, his handsome person, he should never be able to win such love from a young and beautiful woman as this middle-aged wine merchant enjoys. It occurs to him that it might be well to make the round of country vicarages, *incognito*, on the chance of picking up such another pearl.

"How silent you are!" says Vanessa, gayly. "What are you thinking about?"

"I was thinking what luck some men have!" he answers, with another sigh.

She laughs, knowing quite well what he means to imply, but her heart is her husband's, and she has grown used to the little ways of the *jeunesse doree* who hang around her. She takes Ravenhold's compliments and innuendoes like other men's.

"We ought to be looking out for our party," she says. "I don't think you will fulfill your promise of taking me home in time to dress for the ball."

"Do not go!" he whispers, putting out a hand as though to detain her; then, as if suddenly changing his mind, he says, abruptly, rising too, "Yes, I dare say we had better go."

As they step on the gravel path, they confront a tall thin man and a young lady. The former is Sir Bertram.

Ravenhold is just bending to say something to Vanessa—his manner is distinctly *impresee*. Sir Bertram stops suddenly, looks at the pair and addresses them. He has passed Vanessa fifty times in the Row without the smallest recognition—to-night he greets her like an old friend.

"Mrs. Brandon—this is an unexpected pleasure. How are you, Ravenhold?"

Vanessa is so taken by surprise that she responds as though they were still on the same friendly terms as last year before she gave him mortal offense. Besides, she feels no rancor, and is rather glad that the old gentleman should show a disposition to be friendly.

Ravenhold, who is acquainted with Sir Bertram's companion,

enters into conversation with her, and a minute later, Colonel Dallas and John Brandon come up.

Sir Bertram greets both with extreme affability. Before they part, he has asked for Mrs. Brandon's address and permission to call upon her, which she readily accords.

The drive home through the balmy night is delicious, even though the road is ugly and unpicturesque. The pair on the box-seat are not very talkative. Vanessa is thinking in her heart that, to make her happiness complete, Brandon ought to be beside her—Brandon as he was last year—when they whispered all sorts of foolish, incoherent love-words to each other. Ravenhold is rather silent and a trifle sulky. He has the woman beside him he most covets, but—but, she will not answer to his humor—she will not even flirt with him nor make believe in the very least. Fenced and walled round as she is by the love of her husband, she is as far from him as though she were inside Paradise and he standing outside the gate. Yet when now and again his eyes meet hers, there is a half-soft, half-passionate look in them, which, even if he has evoked it, is not for him. The world, that would seem to a looker-on to wag so well with this favored young Adonis, appears a sorry enough place to him just now—it is a place, he would tell you to-night, where you are allowed to have glimpses of delight and pleasure only to accentuate the misery of not being able to grasp them. He is vexed, dissatisfied—he wishes he had taken his sister's advice and left Mrs. Brandon quite alone—after to-night he will. They are nearing the Marble Arch, and Vanessa says, in tones of most genuine regret:

“How sorry I am that we are getting near home!”

He stoops toward her and says in a very low voice, but with a bitter accent:

“Why should you be sorry? You are going home to happiness. It is I who am left out in the cold.”

She answers him gayly enough.

“I will do as you asked me and look out for a nice wife for you; then you won't be left out in the cold.”

He does not reply—she is not so sympathetic as she looks, her gay tone jars upon him.

But, in reality, Vanessa is feeling intensely sentimental. When she and her husband have wished Ravenhold good-night, and thanked him for their pleasant evening, she does not, late as it is, hurry off to dress for the ball, but follows her husband into his comfortable smoking-room. She throws her arms round his neck—she is in a mood for endearments—she pushes him gently into a chair and seats herself on his knee. He responds to her caress in a kind, friendly, semi-paternal manner, then glancing at the clock, says:

“My dear child, pray go and dress, or we shall not get to Grosvenor Square till daylight!”

She starts up with a petulant gesture which he has never seen before and scarcely realizes now. As she mounts the stairs, a sob is choking her, two great tears are shining in her eyes; a sense of bitterest disappointment gnaws her heart. She would

like to give vent to her feelings by a passion of tears and sobs, but in her room stands her attentive maid waiting to dress her, and she is forced to choke back her sobs, don a falsely placid face, and act like a sensible and well-mannered lady instead of a pettish child who does not know what it is crying for.

For the first time in her life she feels bitter against her husband. She tells herself with an aching heart, as she sits under the hands of her maid, that he is tired of her, that he is not really fond of her any longer—and she remembers with painful distinctness Ravenhold's words:

"There is only one thing worth having in the world—love, passionate love; not a mere paltry fancy, which soon subsides into an easy-going liking, or else into indifference, but a love that occupies every moment of one's life; that keeps every nerve full strung; a love that is heaven or hell, but, as I would have it, heaven." Yes, that is what she too desires.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE next morning Colonel Dallas came to escort Vanessa into the Row. He was feeling a little bit piqued and touchy, but she received him in the same glad, cordial manner as usual. It was a lovely morning with a delicious breeze, and they concluded to walk. The colonel had been thinking seriously of reading his lovely friend a little lecture, and was trying to make up his mind how to commence the attack. He did not want exactly to find fault with her; only to say a word in season, the utter futility of which no one knew better than himself. Soon after they had taken their chairs under the shade of a big tree, Lord Ravenhold passed them. He did not stop, but raised his hat with a coldly polite gesture. Vanessa remarked nothing unusual in his manner, but the colonel, whose mind was quite bent on the relations between his nephew and Mrs. Brandon, did, and was ill pleased.

"Ravenhold looks rather sulky," he says, broaching his theme far more broadly and directly than a minute ago he had intended. "What did you do to him last night?"

"I," utters Vanessa. "Nothing. Lord Ravenhold and I are the best of friends. Our ideas agree perfectly. We both think there is nothing in the world worth having but love, and I am going to find him a wife."

The colonel feels and looks as if a yawning chasm had opened at his feet.

"Oh," he says, and for the moment he can positively find nothing else to remark.

A slight melancholy pervades Vanessa's features—her own words have brought back that vague yearning and the sense of disappointment she felt last night. The colonel, looking at her, observes her expression, and it displeases him amazingly.

"I don't think," he remarks, in a short, dry tone, "that you have very much to complain of on that score."

"I!" she exclaims, with a surprised look followed by a swift blush. "But, my dear colonel, you don't understand. Lord

Ravenhold is so jealous of my happiness that he wants to get married at once that he may be happy too."

Again the colonel can only find the same interjection wherewith to express his thoughts.

"I don't think, my lady" (this is a favorite mode of address of the colonel's to Vanessa)—"I don't think, my lady," he observes after a pause, "that love is a very desirable topic of conversation between two handsome young people like you and my nephew. And, if you will forgive my saying so, I do not think it will do you any good to be seen philandering about by moonlight or starlight, whatever it is, with a man who enjoys such a reputation for being inflammable as Ravenhold."

Now if Vanessa's conscience had been in the very least bit guilty she would have felt rather angry with the colonel for this remark, but it is perfectly clear and innocent.

"Then why did you go away and leave us?" she asks gayly; "I should have liked your company just as much."

"Would you?" he says doubtfully. "Ravenhold is considered a very dangerous young fellow, and people *will* talk. And," looking narrowly at her, "it is a literal impossibility to him to be with a pretty woman and not to make love to her."

"He did not make love to me," answers Vanessa, simply. "But then he knows that I am a country girl and that I adore my husband."

"And yet he talked to you of love?"

"Yes," returns Vanessa, frankly. "He said," and here her eyes take rather a pensive, far-off expression—"he said that there was only one thing in life worth having, and that was passionate love; love that occupies all your heart and thoughts and leaves room for nothing else. And I agree with him."

"Ah!" observes the colonel, with extreme dryness, "I suppose that after listening to his exalted sentiments you would find mine very flat and commonplace. But, all the same, let me give you the result of my experience."

"The sentiment about which he said such fine things and you agreed with him, is not love at all, but a much coarser thing—passion. You may etherealize it in your mind (I think women do), but he does not; he knows what he means. Passion does not last; it cannot—its very intensity makes it ephemeral—it can be repeated with another object; but if you imagine that one man can go on feeling equal ardor for the same woman for any length of time, you are likely to go aground on the rock that has shipwrecked so many of your sex. Let me tell you what love is. Love is what your husband feels for you and will feel to the day of his death."

Vanessa experiences a sensation of uneasiness. Has she betrayed the tinge of disappointment which has crept into her heart now and again during the last few months and found its first serious expression only the night before?

"What do you mean?" she cries. "Do you think I do not know it? Do you think I do not know I have the best husband in the world? Why, it was the sight of our happiness that made Lord Ravenhold want to marry."

"I suppose," says the colonel, pointedly, "he wanted to marry if he could find just such another woman as you."

Vanessa laughs.

"My dear colonel," she asks, "what is the matter with you? Did your dinner last night disagree with you? You know you have told me that everything is a matter of digestion, and that *foie gras* would at any time inspire you with a universal distrust and hatred of your kind."

"There was no *pate* last night," answers the colonel, "and I carefully avoided cream, ice, and strawberries. No, this time it is not my digestion."

"Then why do you insist that Lord Ravenhold and I shall fall in love with each other?"

"God forbid," exclaims the colonel, devoutly. "I did not even hint at anything of the sort. Only I don't recommend moonlight walks with him and conversation about love."

"Very well," says Vanessa, anxious to restore his good humor, "in future I shall walk about with you. Only you are not to scold me."

"Scold you, my dear child! Nothing is further from my thoughts. I should not presume to take such a liberty."

Vanessa's eyes, straying down the path, observe Lord Ravenhold and Sir Bertram engaged in conversation at a little distance from them; she sees them part, and then Sir Bertram comes toward her. He stops in front of her, holds out his hand, and smiles. It can scarcely be called a smile, it is rather a spasm of the upper lip, as if some one had pulled a wire in his side—a spasm revealing his long, yellowish teeth. He greets Colonel Dallas also. The colonel returns the salute rather frigidly, and looks away up the Row in a manner that intimates his intention of effacing himself until Sir Bertram shall have said his say to Mrs. Brandon. Sir Bertram thereupon coolly takes the seat beside Vanessa.

"I want you to come down and dine with me at my little place on the river," he says, in his most affable tones, "you and Mr. Brandon. Can you spare me an evening this week? Would Saturday suit you?"

Now Vanessa does not enjoy the society of Sir Bertram, nor does the idea of dining with him inspire any pleasure in her breast; but she is very anxious to be civil to him, and to atone in every way in her power for having once hurt his feelings. So she puts on her prettiest smile and says:

"We are not engaged on Saturday, and we should like it very much indeed."

"I must try to get my nieces to meet you," utters Sir Bertram, well aware of the attractive bait he is offering. "Have you heard that Mabel is engaged to be married?"

"No!" exclaims Vanessa, eagerly. "Is it to——" and then she pauses.

"It is to Sir Thomas Belton," answers Sir Bertram. "We are pleased with the marriage. There is rather a disparity of age between her and Sir Thomas, but that is not always a drawback, is it, Mrs. Brandon?"

And again he has a spasm of the upper lip.

Vanessa is somewhat confused; she scarcely knows how to reply to this *badinage* on Sir Bertram's part, and she cannot offer any cordial congratulations for Mab, remembering the description given of the bridegroom-elect and his black tooth.

"I shall be so delighted to see them again," she says, hastily.

"And do you like London?" asks Sir Bertram. "Does it answer your expectations?"

"Quite. I find it charming," Vanessa answers. "But I am looking forward immensely to going home again. It seems years since I left."

"Oh! We are to have the pleasure of seeing you? That will be something to look forward to. And when is your visit fixed for?"

"We are going down on the 1st of August for two months. My husband cannot get away before then."

"Ah! business must be attended to," and Sir Bertram gives his most repulsive smile.

"Yes," replies Vanessa, not wincing in the least. It is quite true that she would rather her husband was not in business; but she is not ashamed of it.

"Then," says Sir Bertram, rising, "I may look forward to the pleasure of seeing you both on Saturday. Will you drive down about six, so as to have a little time on the water first?"

"I will ask my husband, and send you a line, if I may," replies Vanessa.

"Yes, pray do; but mind, I look upon it already as an engagement."

Sir Bertram says this with stiff playfulness, takes Mrs. Brandon's hand, gives a frigid bow to Colonel Dallas, and goes.

"I hate that man!" utters the colonel, as soon as he is out of ear-shot. "He is a cold-blooded, vindictive brute."

"No, I don't think he is vindictive," Vanessa replies.

"Isn't he? Just look at his face! Besides, I know half a dozen instances of it. He never forgives an injury, nor even a small offense."

"Oh, yes, he does," says Vanessa. "I offended him very much, and you see he is quite kind and pleasant to me."

"He is biding his time," observes the colonel. "Pray, my lady; how did you offend him?" looking curiously at her. "And where did you ever meet him?"

"He was our squire."

"Did he want to make you squireess?"

Vanessa colors a little and laughs.

"What an idea!" she says, evasively.

"Then look out," observes the colonel, significantly. "Has he been friendly with you ever since?"

"He has not spoken to me until last night for nearly a year."

"Do you mean to say that he cut you and has just taken you up again?"

"Yes," says Vanessa, nodding her head.

"Then, if I were you, I would not be taken up now."

"Oh, poor old man! Why not?" smiles Vanessa. "And I am

only too glad to be friendly to him on account of his granddaughters, who used to be my greatest friends?"

"I wonder what his game is?" says the colonel, ruminating.

"No game at all, my dear colonel," laughs Vanessa. "What a suspicious mood you are in! Do you think he, like Lord Ravenhold, wants to supplant my husband? I promise you not to talk about love to him nor to take a moonlight stroll with him if I can help it."

The colonel traces an elaborate pattern with his stick—he is still absorbed in speculating about the nature of the squire's game.

Lord Ravenhold passes them again. This time he is walking with a very handsome girl, to whom he appears to be making himself extremely agreeable.

The colonel gives up thinking about Sir Bertram's game in order to study his nephew's. That takes very little thought—he wishes to pique Mrs. Brandon. The attempt is an utter failure.

"There!" whispers Vanessa, with an accent of triumph that is thoroughly genuine. "You see he has reflected about my advice. I wish he would marry Lady Violet."

"Pooh!" says the colonel. "If he married all the women he looked at in that languishing manner, he would have as many wives as Solomon by now. And, fond as I am of the lad, I don't think I shall envy the woman very much whom he makes Lady Ravenhold."

"Why not?" asks Vanessa. "He is very handsome and very nice."

"Yes," responds the colonel. "And he will go on being very handsome and very nice after he is married."

"What do you mean?"

"Cannot you interpret my parable, my lady?"

"You mean that he will be nice to other people as well as his wife," hazards Vanessa.

"I do," and the colonel emphasizes his remark by a nod.

"Tell me," he continues, "you were very quietly brought up, and, I suppose, with the proper old-fashioned ideas, how does our state of society strike you? You must have had your eyes considerably opened the last three months."

"I don't quite understand it," answers Vanessa, looking rather puzzled.

"Do you think it is right for married people to go philandering about as if they were not married?"

"No," hesitates Vanessa—"only——"

"Only what?"

"If two people are devoted to each other it cannot do any harm, because although you may like to talk to other men you only care for one."

"But when people are not devoted?"

"Then they ought not to marry," returns Vanessa, promptly.

"That is what is so wrong. I am quite unhappy to think of Mab marrying that dreadful old man. How can she?"

"Have you seen him?"

"No."

"He is not at all a dreadful old man. He is not older than—let me see—than Brandon; and he is a thorough good fellow, and will let her have all her own way. I think she is a very sensible young lady."

"Oh!" utters Vanessa, relieved. Still she cannot forget the black tooth.

"But," says the colonel, who has not yet got his sermon off his mind, "I don't quite agree with you. I think harm *can* come of this freedom between young people, even when a woman is devoted to her husband."

"How?" asks Vanessa, opening her eyes.

The colonel hesitates. Shall he speak or shall he forbear? Will he be putting thoughts into her head, instead of keeping them out, as he anxiously desires to do?

"Well, look here, my lady," he says, gazing carefully at the hieroglyphs he is still employed in tracing, "even if a woman is devoted to her husband, there are times when—when perhaps she feels a little put out with him. He is not quite so attentive or so demonstrative as she thinks he ought to be, and she gets a little bit *froissee* or disappointed. Then, you know, if some good-looking young fellow is hanging about telling her that she is quite the most angelic creature in the world, and hinting perhaps that she is not appreciated, and that if she were *his* wife—well, h'm! don't you see—?"

Vanessa laughs, not quite easily—the first part of his sentence has gone home, but not the last.

"My dear colonel," she says, "do not put these ideas into my head, or I shall begin to think it is dangerous to my peace of mind to see so much of you. You know you are always praising and flattering me. I shall have to be on my guard."

"Yes, there is no doubt I am a very dangerous fellow," returns the colonel. He has said his say and does not care to pursue the subject any further. "Do you know," looking at his watch, "that it is ten minutes to two?"

"We must go home to lunch," says Vanessa, rising promptly. When she tells her husband of the invitation for Saturday, he remarks, cheerily:

"You were quite right, my dear. I cannot say I like Sir Bertram. He was extremely rude to me last year; but, poor old fellow, it was not to be wondered at. It will be nice for you to see your friends again."

"I can't tell you how I look forward to it," cries Vanessa. "I am very fond of Mrs. Fane, but I have known them all my life; they are more to me than any new friend could be."

"Naturally," replies Brandon.

The next day Vanessa and Mrs. Fane go to a garden party at Kensington together. They are standing with two or three men grouped round them, when Lady Mildred passes. She has always been very civil to Mrs. Brandon, who, up to this moment, is in blissful ignorance of having offended her. Vanessa makes a step forward with a smiling face and outstretched hand. Lady Mildred meets her with a stare, a chilling bow, and passes on.

in a moment Vanessa is crimson with mortification and bewilderment; she is not used to being snubbed, and feels the slight intensely—all the more, perhaps, because she is entirely ignorant of its motive.

Mrs. Fane's ready tact diverts attention, but the episode has been witnessed by at least four or five persons, who more easily understand it than does Mrs. Brandon.

Half an hour later, as she and Mrs. Fane are driving home together, Vanessa says to her friend:

"Why did Lady Mildred behave so rudely to me? I will never, *never* look at nor speak to her again."

Mrs. Fane does not answer for a moment. Then, as Vanessa's eyes are still fixed in eager inquiry on her face, she says:

"Don't you really know? Have you no suspicion?"

"No," answers Vanessa, truthfully.

Another pause.

"At all events, you know that she considers Gerard her property?"

"Yes." Vanessa certainly knows so much in common with the rest of the world.

A third pause.

"Well," says Mrs. Fane, reluctantly, "she thinks you want to take him away from her."

Then Vanessa, finding words too poor to express her surprise and anger, leans back in the carriage, and utters not another word. She is beginning to see the reverse of the medallion. The world and society had seemed a sort of paradise to her; she had sipped the pleasant surface, and until now had tasted none of the dregs of hatred, envy, and jealousy which more than three parts fill its cup. She has felt a friendly liking for Lord Ravenhold, and every one insists on believing that she entertains sentiments for him which are furthest from her brain; she feels as though she never wants to see him again.

Mrs. Fane guesses something of what is passing in her mind.

"Don't trouble yourself about it, my dear," she says, kindly. "But take my advice and do not dance much with Gerard or see much of him; he is a nice, dear boy, but, all the same, I don't want to have you *affichee* with him."

"I suppose," observes Vanessa, with a bitterness quite foreign to her. "that in society no one can believe in a woman preferring her husband to even so handsome and distinguished a person as Lord Ravenhold."

"No, my dear," returns Mrs. Fane, simply; "that is just it."

The same evening Mrs. Brandon and Lord Ravenhold meet at a ball. He asks her to dance; she smiles civilly—he does not know how her heart is beating—and pleads other engagements. He presses her with some urgency; she grants him a waltz later on; when the time arrives she is nowhere to be found. Most men are stimulated by opposition, none more than Lord Ravenhold. He is on his mettle; he begins to feel as though his honor were somewhat involved in the matter.

On the Saturday fixed for Vanessa's visit to Sir Bertram, she

is in a state of restless excitement—she is longing to see her old friends; several times she has been on the point of writing to them, but has thought it better to wait for their meeting under Sir Bertram's auspices. Her heart beats quite fast as they drive up to the door of his river-side chateau. They are ushered into the drawing-room; a moment later their host steps in at the French windows opening on the lawn.

"Are Edith and Mabel here?" asks Vanessa, as soon as she has greeted him with the usual formula.

"I am so sorry," he answers, "they are unable to come."

As a matter of fact he has not invited them, nor mentioned Mrs. Brandon's name to them.

"I asked two or three pleasant people to meet you," he continues, "but at this time of the year it is impossible to get any one at a short notice. You will find one friend, however."

And, as he speaks, Lord Ravenhold comes strolling up the lawn.

CHAPTER XIX.

VANESSA'S disappointment is so severe that it appears legibly on her face. And it is not in the least atoned for by the sight of Lord Ravenhold, whose name has lately been made a weariness to her flesh. She greets him in an indifferent manner very foreign to her habitual one. He, on the contrary looks pleased and smiling, and is evidently anxious to make himself agreeable. When, at Sir Bertram's proposal, the party betake themselves to the boat, Vanessa devotes her conversation entirely to her host, and her husband and his lordship are left to entertain each other.

It is quite possible that Vanessa has a temper, although she has advanced so far through her earthly pilgrimage without having had occasion to make use of it. Up to the present time there has been no one to vex or cross her, or to raise any spirit of antagonism in her. This evening she feels distinctly cross and put out, and the sensation is as unpleasant to her as though she had a headache for the first time. She partially recovers herself at dinner, but it is still not quite the charming, genial Mrs. Brandon whose graciousness is one of her chief attractions. Certainly when she speaks to her husband there is more than her usual sweetness both of words and looks; he therefore does not observe that there is anything amiss.

Dinner over, she adjourns to the drawing-room, but does not remain there long, seeing the river shining temptingly at the end of the lawn. She strolls out and seats herself on a bench close to the water's edge. It is full tide now; the splash of occasional oars greets her ears pleasantly, the rushing sound of water from the not far distant weir soothes her. The moon is just rising; everything is lovely and peaceful; the charm of the scene appeals to Vanessa's senses, and yet something oppresses her and prevents her from feeling quite happy. She is still laboring under the disappointment of not meeting her cherished friends; although she openly expressed to Sir Bertram at dinner her hope

coming to them soon, he scarcely responded and turned the subject. Then she is ill pleased at Lord Ravenhold being here; it looks as if their host were also under the impression that his society is pleasing to her. She had liked him very much until every one conspired to point out to her that she was in danger of falling in love with him; now she feels rather aggrieved against him and extremely anxious to show him that she is not in the smallest peril of becoming a victim to his fascinations. She has been sitting by the water-side but a very few minutes, as she thinks, when Lord Ravenhold comes with a buoyant step across the turf to join her. His manner is altogether jubilant and triumphant; he carries his head well up, his eyes are alight with pleasure.

But for the monitions of the colonel and Mrs. Fane, coupled with Lady Mildred's insolent behavior, Vanessa would have greeted him with her best smile of welcome. As it is, she feels secretly irritated, and her face denotes neither pleasure nor satisfaction.

"How delicious it is here!" he exclaims. "It is a shame to be indoors such a night."

"Where are the others?" asked Vanessa, coolly.

"*The others*," replies Lord Ravenhold, laughing, "are drinking some excellent claret and discussing with enthusiasm the merits of various vintages."

"Oh!"

A small boat is moored to the steps a couple of yards distant.

"Let us go on the water," cries the young man, eagerly. "It will be heavenly there."

"No, thank you."

"Are you afraid to trust yourself with me?" he asks. "I assure you I can row—I was in the boats at Eton—I can swim like a duck if I should be so clumsy as to upset you."

"No, thank you. I would rather not."

"Why not?"

"I do not care about it."

"But I heard you tell Sir Bertram you enjoyed being on the water more than anything," says Ravenhold, insistently. "What are you afraid of? There is no one about who knows us, and I should not have thought *you* were afraid of Mrs. Grundy."

"I do not suppose any one is afraid of Mrs. Grundy who has not the *very smallest* reason to be so," returns Vanessa, shooting rather a defiant glance at him.

"Then it is because you don't care for my company," says the young man, with some petulance. "Mrs. Brandon!" catching up a small garden-seat and planting himself on it right in front of her, "how have I offended you? What have I done?"

"Nothing that I am aware of," she says, coldly, still feeling unjustly bitter against him. "Surely my not caring to go in a boat is no proof of my being offended with any one."

Lord Ravenhold turns away to conceal his mortification. He sits for some time staring at the water, and Vanessa makes no attempt to break the silence. For the first time in her life she feels a little spiteful—this presumptuous young man has dared

to think, as well as his relations, that his society is pleasing to her and that she is ready to embark on a flirtation with him. She intends to convince him of his error.

Lord Ravenhold, looking up suddenly with some huffy words on his lips, is silenced by her beauty. The moon is shining on her—her lovely eyes are looking away over his head—she sits there in her graceful white draperies looking like a statue, with so much more of beauty than any statue because of the deep color of her eyes and the beautiful red of her perfect mouth. The huffy words are strangled at their birth, and he says, very humbly:

"I thought you were going to be my friend?"

"I am quite willing to be your friend, Lord Ravenhold," returns Mrs. Brandon, showing, however, no disposition at present to thaw.

"If you knew," utters Ravenhold, fixing his eyes on her and speaking almost passionately—"if you knew how badly I want a friend, and how much the friendship of a good woman like you might do for me, I think you would be kinder to me."

Before this appeal the ice gives way, and there is a very noticeable difference in the tone of Mrs. Brandon's rejoinder.

"What can I do for you? I should be glad to be your friend for your sister's sake."

Lord Ravenhold would like to reply that the friendship he desires is not a vicarious one, but is prudent enough to refrain.

"I am not happy," he says. "The life I lead does not satisfy me; it is unnatural—it is all wrong."

Here Vanessa agrees with him perfectly. She thinks it even more wrong since Lady Mildred's treatment of her. The answer she gives him is a little trite and cold, as he feels it to be.

"I do not see how any one can be happy when they are doing what they know to be wrong."

"Ah!" he says, looking very hard at her, "you have never been tempted."

"No," she answers; "that is quite true." ♦

"Perhaps you may be some day."

"Perhaps," she returns, stiffly. "It does not seem probable, though. Having married the man I love best in the world, a man whom I consider superior to every other, there is not much chance of my being tempted to care for any one else."

Each is conscious that a little passage of arms is going on between them.

"It is dangerous to be too secure," remarked Ravenhold. "Feelings are apt to change."

"Are they? I am quite sure mine will not."

Her tone is defiant. She wishes him clearly to understand that there is not the smallest probability of her ever entertaining any regard for him.

He is piqued.

"We shall see," he says, with a smile that provokes her exceedingly.

No suitable retort offering itself to her mind, and not wishing to betray that she is nettled, Vanessa remarks, indifferently:

"How lovely the moon is on that stretch of meadow! It reminds me of the nights this time last year."

"Only then, I suppose, you were enjoying their beauty with a congenial companion."

"I was," and Vanessa sighs, not to provoke him, but because, for the moment, she is recalling that happy past time, and no doubt thinking it, as we are all prone to do, even more blessed than it was.

There is a pause. Ravenhold feels indescribably irritated; he would like either to make love to or to quarrel outright with her; the cool hostility of her manner hurts him—he does not feel that he has deserved it.

He turns and looks fixedly at her.

"If you are so happy," he says, in a half-injured, half-resentful tone, "it ought to make you kinder to those who are not equally fortunate."

Vanessa smiles.

"Why are you not happy?" she asks. "You ought to be. You have everything to make you so. You are a lord, you are rich—you are a handsome young man—they tell me you have only to look at a woman for her to fall desperately in love with you."

Her last speech, with its thinly-veiled sarcasm, opens his eyes. He grasps the situation in a moment. She has been warned against him. In his inward heart he curses the officious meddler who has done him so much harm, none the less because he suspects that busybody to be his own uncle.

He is silent for a moment; then he utters in a mortified tone, looking away across the moonlit water:

"No wonder, if you think me a fool and a puppy, you do not care to be friends with me."

Vanessa is instantly smitten with remorse.

"I do not think anything of the sort," she says, smiling at him.

"Yes, you do," he answers impetuously. "You have probably been cautioned against me. I have admired and respected you more than any woman I have ever met—the thing of all others that charmed me in you was your devotion to your husband, and you think that I am an egotistical, presumptuous fool, who is only to be restrained from making love to you by the most severe and constantly repeated snubs."

He has taken the bull by the horns with a vengeance this time, and there is so much truth in his words and so much dignity in his air that Vanessa is put to confusion. She is induced to say what her better judgment would certainly not have approved had she given it time to counsel her.

"What am I to do?" she exclaims, impulsively. "If every one insists on warning me against you, and in believing that if you honor me by your notice I shall straightway fall in love with you, how am I to convince them that it is possible for a woman, *even in society, even in the age we live in, to prefer her own*

husband to the handsomest man, or the most exalted personage alive?"

"I should have thought you were too clever to be influenced by a pack of fools," returns Ravenhold. "I—I suppose—that—Mr. Brandon has never objected to your being in my society?"

"He!" echoes Vanessa, throwing up her head with a fine scorn. "No, indeed. He, at least, knows me."

Ravenhold feels the least bit in the world foolish.

"Of course," he says. "He would not deserve you if he did not. But now, Mrs. Brandon," pleadingly, "won't you judge me for yourself, instead of listening to what my wise and good-natured relations say? Be friends with me out of the goodness of your heart, because I want a friend, and if you find me taking advantage of your kindness, or trying to do so, kick me out, and have nothing more to say to me."

So Vanessa smiles and makes a compact with him, and the rest of the time which they spend together is passed in perfect harmony. It wants a quarter to eleven when Sir Bertram and Mr. Brandon join them. Both seem in the best of spirits—it is evident that no qualm has visited the husband about his wife's *tete-a-tete* with Lord Ravenhold.

"Ah!" says Sir Bertram, in, for him, quite a jovial tone, "moonshine is all very well for you young people, but a good bottle of claret is not without its attraction for us, eh, Brandon? Every age has its pleasures."

John Brandon assents laughingly—he does not seem in the least offended by being put in the same category with his host.

"I am glad we went," he says to Vanessa, as they are driving homeward. "The old chap was tremendously civil; he is really very good company. And I did a capital stroke of business besides. He has given me a considerable order."

Vanessa feels suddenly *froissee*—the idea jars upon her, and as her husband is proceeding to enter into details of the commission with which he has been favored, she catches him by the arm and says:

"Look, darling, at this little group of houses down there in the moonlight—is it not like a picture? Ah! what a night! It makes me think of this time last year."

"Yes," returns Brandon, complacently. "It is quite a night for lovers. We were lovers this time last year—at least I was, eh, deary?"

"Are we not now?" says Vanessa, sidling up to him and feeling intensely sentimental.

"We are better," he answers. "We have got over the foolish part. By Jove!" catching sight of the clock on a church they are passing, "I had no idea it was so late. Claret like that makes one forget time."

A chill disappointment creeps through Vanessa's heart. She feels acutely aggrieved that claret should have taken the place of romance. No young wife will ever be able to understand why the passionate lover of last year should subside into the tranquil husband of to-day, who seems anxious to shirk everything like romance or love-making.

At this moment Lord Ravenhold dashes past them in his buggy. He raises his hat and speeds onward still faster, with a spasm of envious rage in his heart at the happiness of the pair.

He does not realize any more than Vanessa does, the comfortable tranquillity and absence of emotion that reigns in the breast of the possessor of so much loveliness. He believes that Brandon must be as passionately enamored as he would be were he seated beside so lovely a woman. And it is just as well that he should believe it.

The next day Vanessa writes a long letter to her friends, pouring out all her disappointment at their absence from the party which, on their account, she had looked forward to with such eager expectation. She finishes with congratulations to Mabel, but finds it impossible to make them very hearty.

A long answer comes from Mab almost by return of post:

"What, in the name of fortune, my most beloved Nessa, is the interpretation of all this mystery? You at Riverside! you the guest of the O. G. and expecting to meet us there! What can that terrible old person be plotting? Is he going to take you out in a boat and drown you, or is that fate reserved for your husband? The latter, I expect, after which he will marry the relict—you. He has never so much as mentioned to us having seen or spoken to you; so it is evident his designs are very deep, not to say dreadful. Anyhow, now he has made up with you (or pretended to, for he never forgets or forgives), he will have no excuse for forbidding us to see you; and, although the longest day is past some time, I shall try to find one long enough to make a journey to Bryanstonia and back. I shall cause Sir Tummas (I always call him Sir Tummas; my *fiance*) to drive me there. I observe, my dearest friend, a lack of warmth and heartiness about your congratulations; they have not quite a genuine ring—they are not nearly so gushing as one might expect from a devoted wife like yourself who thinks so highly of marriage, and who has also (pardon the reminder) married a man considerably older than herself.

"Sir Tummas, I assure you, is the most excellent of men—he quite grows upon one; and though I do not think myself capable of committing any rash action on his account, I quite like him in a comfortable and unembarrassed manner. I am rather sorry I told you about his tooth, because I can see that, indirectly perhaps, has prejudiced you against him. But I propose to remedy this blemish. He is quite devoted to me, and is really a chivalrous sort of person. Well, instead of exacting the performance of any knightly feat to prove his devotion to me, I am simply going to ask him to have out his four front teeth and get them replaced by four lovely new ones. (I wonder whether grandpa would contribute one of those elephant tusks in the hall for their confection; they would then have quite a historic interest.) I shall stipulate for their being fixtures; no putting into tumblers—no losing them unexpectedly in the mid-channel, in a spasm of *mal-de-mer*, as happened to a bridegroom I heard of.

"Apart, my dear, from this rodomontade. I like Sir Tammias, and you need not think (as I know you do) that I am a heartless wretch sacrificing myself to Mammon. I don't care for your ridiculous young men who think of nothing but themselves and the fit of their clothes, and who, all the time they are making love to you, are trying to get a bird's-eye view of themselves in the nearest glass. Sir Tammias can stand any amount of teasing, whereas *all* young men are touchy; he admires everything I say and do, and is not even put out by the little practical jokes which my playful nature delights in. Edie is getting so disagreeable about my writing at such length that I must wind up. She seems to think it would involve mortgaging the family estate if we had to put a second stamp on the letter. A million kisses from

Your ever devoted
MAB."

The postscript is written by Edith.

"I have no idea what Mab has been scribbling to you all this time, dearest Nessa, and I certainly have no intention of wading through it. She is wilder than ever. I always told you she had no heart, but I am certain that she likes Sir Tammias quite as well as she is capable of liking any one. Is it not extraordinary? but really he is very kind and good, and it is more his appearance that is against him than anything else. He positively worships her, and loads her with presents, which is just what she likes. Algy thinks you quite a darling. Alas! we are no nearer to happiness than before—further off, I fear; my people won't let me speak to him if they can help it. But I shall be faithful, *whatever happens*. How mysterious about grandpapa asking you down to Riverside and not saying a word to us. I think it must lead to our meeting now.

"I can't tell you how I long to see you. I suppose you are as happy as ever.

"Your most affectionate

"EDITH."

CHAPTER XX.

A MONTH has elapsed—August is waning, and Vanessa is back at the rose-covered Vicarage in the heart of Southshire. She has repeated over and over again to Susan the events of the last ten months, and Susan has never wearied of hearing about her darling's doings, and of saying with a wise nod that she always knew how it would be. When she hears, however, that Vanessa has danced and conversed with a royal personage, her jaw drops, and she feels that fate has even overstepped her predictions.

Brandon thoroughly enjoys the repose of the country—he has brought down a couple of horses, and is teaching his wife to ride; an easy enough matter, as he has taken care to provide her with a quiet, well-broken horse, and she is not troubled with nervousness.

Many a night he and she sit out in the moonlight or the starlight drinking in the balmy air laden with spoils from the

flowers' hearts. Vanessa twines her arm round his neck and leans her cheek against his, and tries to bring back the feelings and emotions of last year: but the gorged monster, satiety, defeats her. She has the kindest, most affectionate, indulgent husband in the world, but the lover is gone; the last page of the romance has arrived: the end has come, "And so they lived happy ever after."

Vanessa fights against her disappointment; is angry with herself for feeling it, and, now and again, becomes rather unhappy; for there is nothing that causes a sensitive nature so much pain as self-disapprobation. People who are downright ill-tempered or selfish or unprincipled are not uncomfortable, because they have no remorse; the ones to suffer are those cursed by a double nature (probably inherited from an opposite father and mother, with a dash of Heaven knows how many other ancestors thrown in); the ones whose good and bad, kind and unkind instincts are always warring against each other; who know what is right and are madly impelled by a stronger will to do what is wrong. Vanessa, whilst vehemently arguing to her conscience that she ought to be the very happiest woman in the world, knows herself to be dissatisfied and disappointed. She stands by the same window as last year, looking at the same sky, and tells herself that the yearnings and aspirations she felt then have been fulfilled and granted; and yet all her heart tumultuously cries out that her whole life is still before her; that six months' romance is not sufficient to last till the end of her days; that every feeling and longing is ten times stronger in her now than twelve months ago. She is as passionately in love with her husband as ever, and his calm, sober affection is to her as a rock against which she vainly dashes the torrent of her love.

One night, recalling the past which seemed so fraught with bliss to her, she bursts into a sudden passion of tears and sobs as she sits beside him in the same spot where last year he suffered the lover's agonies of doubt and fear. He is genuinely distressed, and soothes her with the tenderest endearments, trying to elicit from her the cause of this sudden outburst. It is on her lips to say, "You no longer love me as you did last year," but her heart smites her that such a speech would be ungrateful; and he ascribes her crying fit to atmospheric causes or to some little hitch in the delicate machinery of her sex's nature, which is and ever will be incomprehensible to nine hundred and ninety-nine men out of a thousand.

But Vanessa is not always moping and dissatisfied; on the contrary, she is exceedingly cheerful as a rule, and enjoys excellent health and spirits.

She is looking forward with immense delight to the arrival of Edith and Mabel. Sir Bertram is already at the Hall, and has paid two or three visits to the Vicarage. He seems to have forgotten the vexatious incident of last year, and is especially courteous and civil to the man whom he once spoke of so disdainfully as "my wine merchant."

More than once he has asked the pair to dinner, and has solicited Brandon's opinion on the contents of his cellar.

And when the two girls arrive, Vanessa forgets all about her disappointed romance, and enjoys their society with a keenness of appreciation stimulated by the fact that she is now acquainted with the delightful world of which of yore they brought her strange and fascinating rumors.

Edith is still pining for her guardsman, Mab is in the best of spirits and perfectly satisfied with her choice. Vanessa remarks that although she seems as full of pranks and quips and wiles as ever, there is a considerably greater degree of womanliness about her.

Going up to the Hall one morning to see her friends, Vanessa finds them both in a state of high excitement.

"What do you think, my angel!" cries Mab. "You will never guess if you live to be three thousand and forty. Who do you think is coming here? Guess the most unlikely person in all the world."

"Mr. Howard?" asks Vanessa, straightway doing her friend's bidding.

"Go up to the top of the class," cries Mab. "It is not him, but you are so far right in that he is the most unlikely person in the world to be asked here, not even excepting the other. However, the extraordinary thing in this case is not so much in the individual being invited, as in his accepting——"

"Oh, Mab," interposed her sister, "what a nuisance you are with your riddles and mysteries! Tell her at once, or I shall."

"It is Lord Ravenhold!" cries Mab.

Vanessa is quite as much surprised as her friends expect and wish her to be. Her breath is nearly taken away by the announcement.

"Lord Ravenhold!" she exclaims, opening her eyes very wide and letting her jaw drop ever so little.

"Of course," says Edith, "we know what it means. They are always trying to make me give up Algy, and they think Lord Ravenhold so handsome and fascinating that I shall fall in love with him."

"But what we can't understand," chimes in Mab, "is what induced him to accept. Fancy him leaving his grouse to come here where there is no mortal amusement for him except to play lawn-tennis, or ride with us, or to go out shooting by himself or with Sir Tummas when September arrives. I have always heard that he abhors girls, and 'goes in for married women.' Perhaps he'll flirt with you, Nessa. You do know him, don't you?"

"Oh, yes," returns Vanessa. "His sister and I are great friends."

Since that evening on the river she has not seen a great deal of Lord Ravenhold. She had avoided dancing with or talking to him much in public, and he had been rather petulant and injured in consequence. One day at his sister's he was beginning to remonstrate with her for what he called her unkindness, when Mrs. Fane came tripping in, and seeing a slight agitation in his manner, and some confusion in Vanessa's, the little lady took very good care not to give them another chance of a *tete-a-tete*.

At luncheon on the day that Lord Ravenhold's coming has been announced, Sir Bertram says to Mrs. Brandon, with one of his "smiles by machinery," as Mab calls them:

"We shall hope for your neighborly services to help us entertain Lord Ravenhold;" and she expresses her willingness to serve her host in the manner indicated.

Vanessa is not sorry that he is coming. Personally she likes him, and now that she will be able to talk to him without cautions from his relations or insults from Lady Mildred, she rather looks forward to the meeting. Does she in any way connect his acceptance with the fact of her being Sir Bertram's neighbor? Positively I do not know. Once now and again even an author cannot fathom the secret hearts of his characters.

The day appointed arrives—Lord Ravenhold comes with it. Mr. and Mrs. Brandon are invited to meet him, and Vanessa finds his lordship vastly improved. He is exceedingly cheery; perfectly free from Byronic airs, and in the very height of health and spirits.

The morning after his arrival Mab comes down alone to the Vicarage. She wears a solemn air—her usual vivacity has been laid aside, and she throws herself into a chair with quite a tragic gesture.

"I see it all," she says, gloomily, fixing her eyes on Vanessa. "It is too horrible—it has kept me awake nearly all night."

"My dear child, what is the matter?" exclaims Vanessa, who has not yet made up her mind whether the girl is serious or in jest.

"This is grandpapa's revenge," continues Mab. "I always knew he was a bad, vindictive old man, but this is too horrible."

"What is it?" cries Vanessa, her curiosity stimulated to the highest pitch. "Is it anything about you and Sir Thomas?"

"No," and Mab looks searchingly at Mrs. Brandon. "I wonder if you *really* don't guess what I mean?"

"That, indeed, I do not," returns the other, genuinely.

"Very well. Then I will tell you. Grandpapa has asked Lord Ravenhold here not on Edith's account, but on yours; because he is in love with you."

A vivid flame of crimson shoots over Vanessa's fair face.

"Don't be ridiculous, Mab!" she cries, almost angrily. "There is a limit even to jesting."

"I am not jesting," returns Mab, nothing daunted. "My suspicions were aroused the moment you came into the room last night. Lord Ravenhold had been quiet and *distract*, and as soon as he saw you all his face lighted up, and he was a different being. And I saw that old wretch watching you both as a cat does a mouse, and looking delighted. I know his face when he is pleased—he does not give that ghastly grin then, but there is a sort of horrid delight in his wicked old eyes. When he is making believe he grins with his mouth, when he is glad he does it with his eyes."

There is so much confidence in Mab's tone and manner that Vanessa finds it no easy task to pooh-pooh her—perhaps she

feels that her sharp-sighted friend is not altogether without foundation for her suspicions. After a moment's pause she says.

"It is a comfort to think that his amiable intentions, if he has any, will be defeated."

Mabel contemplates her friend for a whole minute without speaking. She is eighteen and unmarried, Vanessa is twenty and has a husband, but the former looks and speaks at this moment like a woman of the world, and the latter like a school-girl.

"Don't be angry with me, Nessa," she urges, with extreme earnestness. "Of course I know you are devoted to Mr. Brandon, but Lord Ravenhold is very handsome, and has most taking manners. He is always making love to some one, and now, I know, it is going to be you. And he always makes a woman care for him when he wants to."

Vanessa gets fairly angry. Is it an absolute fatality that the moment Lord Ravenhold appears on the scene some one should spring up to watch and to warn her?

"Oh, all right," she says, with extreme coldness; "there is one very simple way out of it. As people seem to think me either a fool or a baby, unable to take care of myself, I will not go up to the Hall as long as Lord Ravenhold is there."

"Don't be silly!" cries Mab, rather frightened at the tone Mrs. Brandon is taking. "That would rouse every one's suspicions."

"And lay them too," retorts Vanessa. "For if we do not meet, it is impossible for the most scandalous person to think or say anything about it."

In vain Mab entreats, conjures, implores. Vanessa's anger and obstinacy are roused, and she adheres to her determination of not meeting Lord Ravenhold again. So at last Mab has to leave her, feeling very crestfallen and like an officious person who has been slapped in the face for his pains. She knows pretty well that if her grandfather suspected her of interfering with his plans she would have a very uncomfortable time for the next few weeks. Vanessa, left to herself, is sorely vexed and put out. She has anticipated a certain amount of pleasure from Lord Ravenhold's visit—has been looking forward to picnics, lawn-tennis, and pleasant dinners at the Hall. And now, if she keeps her word as she means to, she will have the constant bitterness of thinking that all these agreeable things are taking place without her. For the first time in her life, she almost dislikes Mab. So ruffled are her plumes that Brandon, joining her half an hour later in the garden, cannot but observe her perturbed and altered manner.

"What is the matter, deary?" he says, kindly. "What has gone wrong? You and the faithful Susan have not been indulging in a set-to, have you?"

"Oh," cries Vanessa, glad to give vent to her wrath, "I am so furious—I should like to kill some one."

"Hey-day!" exclaims Brandon, surprised at this unusual exhibition of temper on his wife's part. "Why, what in the name of fortune has any one being doing to you?"

A sudden instinct seizes Vanessa. She will tell him the truth. Why not? Her conscience is clear and innocent enough.

"Johnnie," she says, suddenly, stopping and looking into his face, her deep-colored eyes kindling with excitement, "people are too hateful and disgusting and abominable."

"Who are people?" he asks, in his calm voice, with an amused smile.

"Every one, she returns, with emphasis.

"Do I come under the category?"

"No!" passionately. "You are more than every one to me." And, with that, she draws him to a bench hard by, lays her head on his shoulder, and begins to cry.

"Tell me all about it, darling," says Brandon, kissing her.

It suddenly occurs to Vanessa that, after all, it is not a very easy thing to tell him, and that perhaps she had better let it alone. If he pressed her, she might perhaps have decided to keep silence, but as he only sits and waits with exceeding patience, she concludes to unburden herself of grief and anger. She begins in rather a circumlocutory fashion.

"Do you think I love you?"

"Yes, my darling, God bless you—I am sure you do."

"Do you think it possible for me to fall in love with any other man?"

"I hope not," smiling and with the serenest confidence in his voice.

With the perversity of heart and brain peculiar to the female sex alone, it suddenly occurs to Vanessa to wonder why he should be so entirely and perfectly sure of her. It almost piques her.

"You are not afraid of my falling in love with Lord Ravenhold?"

"Not in the very least," answers Brandon, in an amused tone. He thinks he sees his way to it now. The girls up at the Hall are jealous of her, and have been putting this idea into her head. What an extraordinary thing is the jealousy of women!

"Then," says Vanessa, "you are different from every one else. I suppose he carries a love-philter about him—or it may be because I am considered especially susceptible, being only a country bumpkin, but I have this morning for the third time been warned against his lordship's fascinations."

"For the *third* time?" inquiringly.

"Yes. The colonel warned me first, then Mrs. Fane, and now, if you please, Miss Mab, who is excessively exalted in her own estimation because she is going to be married to a baronet old eno—"

Here Vanessa stops suddenly.

"Old enough to be her father, like I am," supplies Brandon, amused.

"You are not!" cries Vanessa, passionately, flinging her arms around him. "You are forty-two, and if you were eighty-two you are the dearest darling in the world, and worth all the Lord Ravenholds who ever drew breath."

Surely Vanessa ought not to be surprised that her lord feels quite easy in his mind about possessing her entire affection!

"My dear child," he says, stroking her head lovingly, "if you are satisfied, and I am satisfied, what does it matter about any one else?"

"It does matter!" cries Vanessa, vindictively. "They are wretches, and I hate them. And so," half proudly, half remorsefully, "I have told that meddling Miss Mab that as long as his lordship remains at the Hall they will not have the pleasure of seeing me there. And what is more, I shall not go to the picnic this afternoon."

"Why, you little goose," says Brandon, "you could not choose a better way of making people talk."

"Mab says," pursues Vanessa, looking at her husband out of the corner of her eye, "that Sir Bertram has asked Lord Ravenhold here out of revenge in the hope that I shall fall in love with him."

At this Brandon laughs outright, and Vanessa, instead of rejoicing in the confidence her husband shows in her, is, inconsistently, a little bit nettled by it.

"Ah," she says, perversely, "you were not so sure of me this time last year."

He draws her toward him and says, with momentary gravity:

"Would you rather I was not so sure of you now?"

"No, no, no!" she cries, and stops his mouth with kisses. "If you were not sure, you would be too wicked and good for nothing to live."

So you see, Vanessa is about as capricious as the rest of her sex. Her determination, however, holds good not to go to the picnic planned for that afternoon. Knowing the absurdity and futility of pleading indisposition, she, without a word to any one, slips away and hides herself, leaving her husband to make her excuses as best he may.

"Well?" she inquires the same evening on his return, "did you have a nice time?"

"Oh, *quite too delightful!*" he answers, laughing. "I never saw Sir Bertram so disagreeable. The young ladies seemed dull, and as for Ravenhold, I don't think I should envy his wife if he gets one. I suppose," smiling, "that he is in love with you, whatever you may not be with him."

"He is only in love with himself," retorts Vanessa, frowning, but secretly pleased to think the picnic has not gone off well in her absence. For her part, she has spent the most disagreeable afternoon, bored to death, and longing to be one of the coach-load whom she imagined to be enjoying themselves amazingly. *Ennui* has conquered her pride; she does not mean to be done out of any more of the Hall festivities.

CHAPTER XXI.

"Who has been offending Mrs. Brandon?" inquires Sir Bertram the next morning at breakfast, with his worst smile.

"I suppose she is setting up for a fashionable beauty," re-

marks Lord Ravenhold, with a bitterness that betrays him to two out of the other four persons assembled. "She thought we wanted her, and so she stayed away to make us feel her loss."

"I think we did very well without her," remarks Mab, who is extremely indignant with Vanessa for the fright and discomfort she has caused her.

"Do you?" sneers her grandfather. "Your ideas of a cheerful party must be rather of a singular kind. But, no doubt," with a still more vicious twist to his smile, "you were occupied with your own pleasing thoughts."

"Yes," returns Mab, demurely, "I was thinking of dear Sir Tummas," and her tone and the little accompanying sigh are so irresistibly comic that every one except Sir Bertram bursts out laughing.

It effects a diversion for a moment.

"Brandon is an excellent fellow," pursues the squire, "but he is monstrous dull, except when he is talking about his own *specialite*."

"*Specialite* sherry," murmurs Mab; but her sister nudges her sharply. Sir Bertram is not in a humor for trifling.

"I think," says the old gentleman, looking blandly at Ravenhold, "that we must get you to go down to the Vicarage and persuade Mrs. Brandon to spend the afternoon and dine here. We really cannot do without her."

A light leaps into the young man's eyes that is neither lost on the squire nor Mab.

"I will go with you," cries the latter.

"No," utters Sir Bertram, in his sternest, most authoritative tone. Then, more mildly, "Your mission was not so successful yesterday that we can intrust you even to take part in one to-day."

Mab quails. She did not know that her grandfather was aware of her visit to the Vicarage. At all events he cannot know her errand, but the expression of his eyes and her own conscience make her terribly uncomfortable.

"Be sure," says the squire, impatiently, to Ravenhold, as he is starting—"be sure you bring Mrs. Brandon back to us. Your powers of persuasion ought to be considerable."

Ravenhold goes on his way rejoicing and unsuspecting; when a person plays into our hands we seldom suspect him of ill motives; it is reserved for the "lookers-on" to do that.

Swift thoughts chase each other through his mind as he walks down the drive where last year Sir Bertram conceived the idea of raising Vanessa to share his throne. What shall he say to her? Will he prevail? Will he see her alone, or will that inevitable husband be there? He scarcely knows what he wants, hopes, expects; he knows that he thinks Mrs. Brandon the most beautiful woman in the world, and that it is longing for the sight of her *beaux yeux* that has brought him from one of the cheeriest houses and parties in Scotland to what he is pleased to call "this God-forsaken hole."

There are not, after all, a great many villains in the world--

villains who premeditate seduction, murder, and other heinous crimes. A sudden impulse comes upon a man; he does not check it, he has not the courage to stop and look the thing in the face; he lets himself go, that is all. But once you let yourself go, there is only one way of going, because the road is down hill every step of the way.

The door of the Vicarage stands wide open, but, as he cannot enter unannounced, Lord Ravenhold naturally rings the bell, and Susan comes in haste to obey the summons. Susan, in spite of her age, has an extremely susceptible heart, and, at a glance, she sees that the handsomest and most distinguished young man she has ever "clapped eyes on" is before her.

"Is Mrs. Brandon at home?"

"Yes, sir," replies Susan, invitingly. "Will you please to walk in?" and he joyfully follows her to the drawing-room.

"What name shall I please to say, sir?" Susan inquires.

"Lord Ravenhold."

"I beg your pardon, my lord," and Susan blushes, drops a courtesy, and hurries out, horrified at having committed the awful solecism of calling a lord, sir.

"Oh, my dear, I *am* vexed!" she exclaims as she enters the breakfast-room in quest of Vanessa. "There's a lord come to see you, and I called him plain sir. I hope his lordship isn't offended. I might have known by the look of him; he looks a lord every inch. I hope you'll excuse me to his lordship."

A nervous flutter comes to Vanessa's heart; she does not know what Susan is saying; she is divided between being angry with Lord Ravenhold for coming, and wondering how she shall behave to him.

She rises and prepares to join him.

"You will tell his lordship, ma'am, won't you?" reiterates Susan, anxiously, and Vanessa returns absently:

"Oh, yes. He won't mind."

Her lip quivers a little, but she assumes a smiling, unconcerned air as she goes in to greet her guest. She wishes her husband were at home, but he has gone fishing, and her father is in his study absorbed in his beloved work. It would be cruel to disturb him, and Vanessa scarcely sees how he would benefit the situation.

An Englishwoman with a good complexion always looks her best in the morning. Vanessa, in her blue batiste with lace about her throat and wrists, is a notable example of this fact.

"How d'you do, Lord Ravenhold?" and she advances smiling. He replies, rejoins rather, with the same inevitable question.

There is a slight matronliness in Mrs. Brandon's manner—a little air of being in her own house that makes it difficult for Ravenhold to break into sudden reproach, as he had been on the verge of doing. That is all very well on neutral grounds, by a river's margin, or on a chair in the Row, or even in the corner of a friend's room, but when you call upon a lady in her own house it is different.

Ravenhold puts on his best manner.

"I am the bearer of a round-robin," he says. "The party at

the Hall are in despair at your having forsaken them. I am charged to implore you to come up to-day to spend the afternoon and dine."

Now what perversity makes Vanessa, after deciding to herself that she will not keep away from the Hall and be bored as she was yesterday, reply:

"Thanks, very much, but I do not think I shall be able to manage it to-day."

Ravenhold's handsome face darkens.

"A previous engagement, I suppose?"

There is a manifest sneer in his tone as well as his words.

Vanessa's color rises—she is not quite prepared with an answer.

"A mothers' meeting, or a Bible-class, perhaps?" suggests Ravenhold, in still more biting tones.

"Perhaps," retorts Vanessa, her eyes beginning to blaze at his manner.

"What have I done?" cries the young man, laying aside his mask. "Why do you shun me as if I had the plague? I came here all the way from Scotland just to see *you*, and you won't look at or speak to me, or come near the place because I am there."

"Hush!" says Vanessa, with a glance at the open window, feeling that nervousness about some one hearing or seeing that is the inevitable portion of a woman when a man is making a reckless and inconsiderate display of his passion.

At this hint Ravenhold modifies the loudness of his voice, but pays no other attention to the suggestion.

"At least tell me why?" he hurries on. "Am I personally offensive to you, or what in Heaven's name have I said or done?"

Vanessa feels a little bit frightened—she is distinctly conscious that it is wrong for Lord Ravenhold to be talking to her in this manner, and yet his show of temper is not altogether displeasing to her. There is the element of excitement in the situation which is an agreeable change from the placid monotony of her life.

"You must really not talk like this," she says.

"If your husband objected to me—if I had thrust myself upon you, or presumed to make love to you, it would be different. Have I" (vehemently) "said one word of love to you?"

"Certainly not," replies Vanessa; then, with a touch of malice, "Where would be the use?"

"Precisely," retorts the young man, with extreme bitterness. "I am not quite a fool. I have at least the sense to be perfectly conscious of your supreme indifference to me."

"That is right," replies Vanessa, cheerfully.

"Then," says Ravenhold, quoting his own words as though they had been hers, "if you are so supremely indifferent to me, why avoid me?"

"Because," returns Vanessa, again acting on an impulse which is not particularly prudent one—"because it is the old story, and I have been warned against you for the third time"

"Upon my soul, this is too much!" cries the young man. "To whom am I indebted on this occasion?"

"I shall not tell you," replies Vanessa. "I am not a mischief-maker. Of course it is utterly ridiculous. You know it is, and I know it is, and my husband knows it is. I told him, and he laughed at the idea. He did all he could to persuade me to go yesterday, but I was so provoked that I would not."

Lord Ravenhold is intensely nettled.

"As you say," he observes, in a voice that cruelly betrays his wounded pride, "it is utterly ridiculous, but sometimes a thing that is *only ridiculous* has power to annoy. I will therefore make an excuse and leave the Hall to-morrow, and I trust that after my departure you will be able to resume your agreeable relations with the people up there."

Vanessa is sorry that she has been so hard upon him. She had snubbed him intentionally because he, no doubt, like the rest of the world, thought himself capable of endangering her peace of mind, and she would not rest until she had convinced him of his error. Now she thinks she has convinced him, and is disposed to be kind again.

"Do not go away, and do not be offended," she says. Then, with a bewitching smile: "After all, I think I can get off the mothers' meeting and the Bible-class" (with meaning) "so I will come up this afternoon, if you really think they want me."

"They do really," returns Ravenhold, eagerly. "Sir Bertram is quite bent on your coming—he said I was to do my utmost to persuade you."

"Instead of which you have done your utmost to quarrel with me, and to be disagreeable," says Vanessa, maliciously.

Ravenhold expresses his contrition with the utmost humility. He can afford to be humble now that he has got what he wants. So he is pardoned and shown the garden and various objects of interest, and makes himself so agreeable and amusing that he leaves Mrs. Brandon with a distinct conviction in her mind that a *solitude a deux* is infinitely more agreeable than the real *bona fide* solitude.

She looks forward to the afternoon. Sir Bertram thoughtfully sends the low phaeton for her, and invites Lord Ravenhold to charioteer it.

"You might ask Mrs. Brandon to show you a bit of the park instead of coming straight here," remarks the squire, but when this suggestion is communicated to Mrs. Brandon, she says at once that she would much rather go straight to the Hall. Whatever he may feel, Ravenhold dares not show any more temper to-day. He does not pay any particular attention to Vanessa, but seems rather by way of making himself agreeable to Edith, who receives his attentions in a friendly and, as far as he is concerned, heart-whole manner. Between him and Mab there is a certain antagonism—he is afraid of her sharp eyes, and she wishes him to know that she is watching him and quite aware of his sentiments.

Three or four days pass in unbroken harmony—not once has Ravenhold betrayed any petulance to Mrs. Brandon nor at-

simplified to make love to her. It may be that his eyes have said volumes when he has imagined himself unobserved by the rest of the party, but his voice has been respectful, deferential, courteously friendly. Vanessa likes him better than at one time she thought it possible—he is certainly very pleasing to look upon, and it is impossible to feel dull or bored in his company.

One day her husband says to her, smiling:

"I can quite understand people thinking it good-natured to warn you against Ravenhold. He is a very good-looking fellow, and has a most taking manner."

"Do you think so?" returns Vanessa, carelessly. "I do not see anything particularly taking in him."

And then she experiences a sudden shock at her heart as she realizes that she has spoken untruthfully, insincerely. Why has she done so? For the life of her she could not tell.

"I have heard," says Brandon, who is no more capable of doubting her than of uttering a lie himself, "that very handsome people seldom produce much effect upon each other. A law of nature, I suppose."

"Perhaps," replies Vanessa, and changes the subject.

Lord Ravenhold has been eight days at the Hall; on the ninth he is to leave it—Sir Bertram has ordered a picnic for his last afternoon. The party consists of six persons—Sir Thomas and Mab, Mr. and Mrs. Brandon, Lord Ravenhold and the squire.

A late luncheon has been consumed—the party have divided into pairs, of which it is not unnatural that Ravenhold and Vanessa should make one. They have strolled into the lovely woods where the shade is so grateful this hot day, and they have found a tree with a rude carved seat beneath it, and there they rest from their labors and are thankful. Conversation is a trifle desultory, but they have arrived at that pitch of familiar friendship whose surest sign is that neither finds it embarrassing or impolite to say nothing if he has nothing to say. Ravenhold's occasional silences, however, are not, in truth, the result of his not having anything to say, but of his not daring to say it. Vanessa feels languid from the heat and a shade depressed besides.

"This time to-morrow," says Ravenhold, after a longer pause than usual, "I shall be in the train, getting further and further away from you every moment, thinking that this must have been the happiest hour of my life and ready to give everything I possess in the world to have it come over again."

"Shall you?" utters Vanessa. "One often thinks afterward that one was much happier than one really was."

"Yes," he answers, in a low voice. "After all, God knows that if what I feel now is happiness, it is scarcely a sensation to desire very ardently."

She glances up at him and swiftly away again. Something she reads in his eyes disturbs her—a little flutter crosses her heart—she has not been afraid to be with him before, because he has not betrayed any feeling that need shock or alarm her; but now she wishes that she had not come here alone with him.

She has a terrified consciousness that he is going to say *something* which he ought not to say and she ought not to hear.

"Shall you see Mrs. Fane soon?" she asks, quickly, just for the sake of saying something. But he does not answer her. Then, perforce, she looks at him again, compelled by some magnetic power. He is very pale—his eyes have dark streaks under them—his lips are quivering.

"Let us go," she says, rising hurriedly.

"No," and he lays a detaining hand on her arm. "Not yet—not just yet."

She sinks back again on the seat, half afraid to contradict him. There is another silence, which is horribly painful and embarrassing to Vanessa. Ravenhold breaks it presently.

"How you must laugh," he says, in a low, husky voice, "when you think over the warnings my people and other friends were so kind as to give you! It is a pity, isn't it, that they never thought of warning me instead? They might have done so, because I am not so fortunate as you in having a talisman that makes me impervious to feeling."

"I do not understand you," she answers, pale as death, and with a sick feeling of terror at her heart.

"Yes," he says, never removing his eyes from her "you do. You know that I am madly in love with you—that I am suffering torments at the thought of parting from you—that the idea of life without you is hateful and monstrous to me."

Vanessa sits as if chained to the spot. A sense of horror and guilt creeps over her, as if by listening to him she is committing a crime; she is afraid to start up and break away from him, because instinct tells her that he would detain her by main force until he had had his say.

"My God!" he cried, passionately, "when I think how perversely things happen! Why did they not ask me here this time last year, and then you would have loved me instead of him? You would!" vehemently, as though she had contradicted him. "You must have done—it would have been fifty times more natural. And then I should have been the happiest man alive, and I would have made you the happiest woman."

"You would not!" cries Vanessa, almost violently. "I never, never could have cared for any one as I do for my husband; he will always be more to me than all the other men in the world."

"Are you quite sure of that?" says Ravenhold, catching her hand. She drags it from him and starts up.

"Quite sure. How dare you say these things to me! I am glad and thankful that you are going to-morrow, and I will never speak to you again as long as I live."

She flies over the turf—he has to take tolerably long strides to keep up with her; he dares not touch her—he tries to stammer a few propitiatory words.

In the distance they suddenly see a solitary figure approaching them. It is Sir Bertram. Vanessa slackens her pace and endeavors to assume an indifferent manner as he comes up. But he marks well their white faces and their unnatural air and says with a diabolical smile:

"Have you young people lost all count of time? We have been waiting twenty minutes for you. What a thing it is to be young!"

CHAPTER XXII.

ALL through the long night Vanessa lies broad awake. She is bitterly indignant against Lord Ravenhold. How dared he speak so to her! She felt it a sort of disgrace to have listened to such words. She had never been hard upon those fashionable women who allowed men to make love to them because they, she thought, were not married to men they loved; but she had looked upon herself as immeasurably superior to them. She had not imagined that any man would dare to speak to her in earnest about love. How glad she was that he was going away, but in any case, she would not have seen or spoken to him again.

Weary of lying awake, she got up softly and looked out of her window. There were red streaks across the pale sky—the trees and the old church tower stood out dark and clear against it. After awhile she turned away. Her eyes fell on her husband's placid face as he lay sleeping—what a kind, good, honest face it was! how different from that passionate, distorted one, however handsome, which had frightened and made her angry to-day! A sudden impulse seized Vanessa to wake him; to tell him everything, and to hear him exonerate her from any wrongdoing or even imprudence in having been alone with Ravenhold and compelled to listen to his passion. But few people are cruel enough deliberately to rouse a fellow creature from his blest oblivion at day-dawn unless there is a train to be caught, and Vanessa was not one of the few. She did, it is true, move about the room less quietly than she might have done, in the hope that he would unclothe his eyes without her actually disturbing him, and then, most certainly, she would have poured out all her heart to him. But he was sleeping the sleep of the just, and nothing short of a vigorous shaking would have awakened him.

When, at last, Vanessa fell asleep, she slept heavily, so heavily that neither her husband nor Susan thought fit to disturb her in the morning. It was half-past nine when she unclosed her eyes, still with a sense of drowsiness and unaccountable *malaise*. What ailed her? She looked at the clock. Half-past nine! why, they must have finished breakfast. How was it that no one called her?

At this moment the handle turned softly, and her husband came in.

"What has happened, Johnnie?" she cries, rubbing her eyes. "Why was I not called?"

"You were in such a sound sleep, my child, that we had not the heart to wake you. Susan and I looked at you and consulted, and then we decided to leave you alone."

"I remember now," says Vanessa. "I was awake all night. It was broad daylight before I went to sleep."

"Why, how was that?" exclaims Brandon. And then, his

practical mind searching for a probable cause, "Did you eat anything that disagreed with you last night?"

Vanessa laughs.

"No—it was the heat, I suppose."

"Ravenhold has just been here," says Brandon, sitting down on the edge of the bed. "He was on his way to L—, and seemed dreadfully disappointed not to be able to wish you good-bye. I am afraid," smiling, "he is another victim of yours."

"Really!" utters Vanessa, in an indifferent tone. She has no manner of inclination to make any confidences to her husband this morning on the subject of Lord Ravenhold. But what can be said by a woman in the night, or at day-dawn, pillowed on her beloved's heart, is one thing—the garish light of morning has the effect of shutting up her confiding inclinations.

Whilst she dresses, whilst she gathers roses in the garden, whilst she hangs on her husband's shoulder as he reads the paper, Vanessa is repeatedly telling herself how rejoiced she is that Ravenhold is gone. She will walk up to the Hall in the afternoon and see the Vaughans—how pleasant it will be without him! But when she is there, it seems unaccountably tame and flat—the flavor is gone out of everything—there is no doubt he was excellent company and very good to look at.

"How dull it is without Lord Ravenhold!" Edith says. "I miss him tremendously. Do not you?"

"No," answers Vanessa, and is irritated with herself for telling what she knows to be a falsehood.

"And yet," observes Edith, "you and he seemed great friends. It was certainly you whom he came here to see."

"Where are Mab and Sir Thomas?" asks Vanessa, not caring to pursue the conversation.

"I caught a glimpse of them a few minutes ago. It is very amusing to see her with him, is it not?"

"Yes," replies Vanessa, thoughtfully. "But, Edie, I think he is too old for her. Some day she will perhaps be disappointed in him, and feel that she ought to have married a younger man."

"Oh," says Edith, "Mab has no heart: she is not like you or me. He will give her everything she wants. I don't think she wants love."

"It must be a bad thing to want and not to have," remarks Vanessa, with a profound sigh.

When Sir Bertram sees her, he says, pleasantly:

"What a loss Ravenhold is! I never missed any one so much. He was the life and soul of us all. What a cheery, handsome fellow he is! Devilish handsome, upon my word! I wonder he has not been snapped up long ago. Do you not agree with me?" For Vanessa had listened unresponsive.

"Oh, yes," she answers, indifferently.

Sir Bertram smiles. He knows that, if she really felt indifferent, she would feign a little enthusiasm out of simple politeness.

Two days pass—two long, heavy, leaden days, which drag their length along. Vanessa looks fifty times at the clock, and thinks continually that the hands must have stopped. Country

Life is very dull and monotonous certainly, and there are yet three whole weeks to be got through before they will return to town. Vanessa takes to thinking. She sits for long hours with idle hands, lost in reverie. She hies her way to an adjacent wood, where the thick foliage shuts out the sun, and sits there deep in thought and heaving unconsciously profound sighs. Sometimes she weeps passionately. What has come to her?

She has lost all rancor against Lord Ravenhold; she recalls that scene in the wood with something of longing; after all, there was excitement in it—it was better than this terrible stagnation. She likes now almost to remember the passion and pain of his handsome face and his violent words and manner—words that made little impression upon her then are burnt into her heart now.

“Why did not they ask me here last year, and then you would have loved me instead of him? It would have been fifty times more natural. And then I should have been the happiest man alive, and I would have made you the happiest woman.”

Would it have been so? At all events, they would have been young together—and Vanessa says to herself there is no doubt that people ought to be young when they marry. She adores her husband—he is the best, kindest creature in the world, but his day of passion and strong feeling is over; he only wants to lead a comfortable, easy, placid life, and that does not satisfy her—she feels as though her heart were intombed alive.

The days creep by—her reveries continue—she grows hollow-eyed, and instead of the country air bringing fresh roses to her cheek it seems to make her more pale. She has indulged her reveries, has wept her bitter tears, and in all that has never believed herself guilty of a shadow of treason toward her husband.

One day Edith says to her:

“I have something for you. I had a letter from Gerard Ravenhold to-day, and he inclosed one for you.”

Vanessa feels her heart beat to suffocation; it frightens her.

“This is what he says to me,” pursues Edith, reading a passage from her letter: “‘Will you give the inclosed to Mrs. Brandon privately? It concerns a mutual friend of hers and mine. I wish her to know it, but not any one else, unless of course she feels disposed to tell Mr. Brandon. But that she will exercise her own discretion about.’”

In spite of a severe effort, Vanessa's hand trembles as she takes the letter directed to herself. Edith looks at her a little inquisitively, and feels disappointed when Vanessa puts it unopened into her pocket. If it had been Mab she would have asked point blank what it was about, but Edith is reticent.

Vanessa does not attempt to open the letter until she is at home locked in her own room. Then she read:

“For God's sake forgive me! You would if you knew what I have suffered and am suffering. Some day perhaps you may know what it is to be as I am—utterly hopeless and heart-broken. Then you will feel for me. For pity's sake think better of your cruel resolve never to see me again!”

When Vanessa has read this, an awful, death-like chill creeps through her heart. This letter has brought a revelation to her. It is as though some voice were crying aloud in her ear—she puts up both hands to shut it out. Then, with a violent gesture, she tears the paper across and across and flings it into the grate. Not content with that, she lights a match and burns every morsel. Would to God she could burn the memory with the writing! But she has a faithful and courageous heart—she is not one of those who “let themselves go”—she fights bravely, and in time comes to think that she has conquered. From this moment she changes her mode of life. No more solitary rambles, no more reveries in the wood; if she can help it, she will not be alone. She reads, walks, works with a sort of fury—she dreads idleness and its consequences as much as Mr. Watts did. She persuades her husband to take long rides and walks with her—she goes up every day to the Hall and plays lawn-tennis or croquet. Edith finds her less sympathetic than formerly; she does not seem inclined to talk about love—indeed, she rather affects the younger sister’s company, and laughs when Mab derides the tender passion.

John Brandon, utterly confident and unsuspecting, is delighted at the improvement in her spirits—the country has, after all, done her the good he expected it would; he does not remark that she has a harassed, restless air, and seems incapable of being quiet—he only sees that she is very cheerful and busy and in excellent spirits. She never throws herself on his breast in a flood of tears now—moonlight nights seem no longer to have the effect on her that they had a month ago; instead of being sentimental, she is full of vivacity. He does not know that sometimes, when he is sleeping soundly, she steals away into the next room, and, shutting the door behind her, throws open the windows, and, leaning her arms on the sill, with her face buried in them, cries out the passion and grief of her heart. By morning the traces of her tears are gone—he sees nothing, suspects nothing. If once and again a mad desire takes her to confess her feelings to him—to say to him, “Be what you were last year; heap love and caresses upon me so that you shut out all other thoughts from my heart; it is not his love I want, but yours—only love I must have,” she does not act on the impulse, and he does not suspect it. Vanessa is glad when the time comes to go back to London. She leaves her father and Susan with regret, but country life has grown intolerable to her—*there is too much time to think.*

She goes shopping; she occupies herself with decorating and beautifying her house; she furnishes a boudoir for herself; she sings and plays; she reads hundreds of books. She often makes her husband take her to the play, but when the piece treats much of love, it gives her the headache. She feels more than ever the want of air, and takes long walks and drives. When she passes the deserted Row, she thinks with a sort of pang of the past season, and a vague terror and wonder seizes her as to what will happen next year.

One wet afternoon of late October she is sitting in draw-

ing-room—her boudoir is not yet finished—she has not even heard the bell, when, suddenly, the door opens and Lord Ravenhold is announced. Her heart stands still—she starts up, first hot, then cold. But he comes forward smiling, unembarrassed, as though he had never said violent and passionate words to her; as though he had never written to her about his broken heart. On the contrary, he is cheery and debonair, tells her of his doings, his amusements, his sport; has little stories of people whom she knows, and talks generally in a gay and heart-whole strain. And next month, he tells her, he is going to India to shoot big game.

An unacknowledged sense of disappointment, of mortification, steals to Vanessa's heart, whilst, all the time, she is trying to tell herself how glad she is that he has forgotten his fancy and that he is inclined to be friendly with her—nothing more. She has a bitter thought, too, about the value of a passion like his lordship's. Whilst he is still with her, Brandon comes in, greets him cordially, and asks him to dine. He accepts with evident pleasure. During the next fortnight he is constantly with Mr. and Mrs. Brandon—he dines with them and they with him—they go frequently to the play together, Vanessa finds his company delightful; his manner is charming; he is full of spirits and fun—he seems to take almost as much pleasure in her husband's company as in hers.

She wonders sometimes if she dreamed that scene in the wood. Then she says to herself that, being away from Lady Mildred, he wanted to play at making love to some one, and tried to keep his hand in with her. It was fortunate for her that she was not impressionable, and that she was devoted to her husband. But there were moments, even now, when she was not quite sure what his feelings for her, or hers for him, really were.

He touched her hand by accident or design: his eyes met hers, and then her heart would become like wax before a flame, and afterward she would be angry with herself and with him.

The time for his departure drew nigh; it only wanted two days of it. Vanessa told herself that she was glad he was going; the last fortnight had been delightful, but she had a misgiving whether it had been very good for her. Truth was, the time spent in his company was too happy, while the hours away from him were too long and dull, and she could not settle to anything.

The dusk was creeping on. Vanessa was sitting with idle, listless hands, looking at the little spurts of flame in the fire, when Lord Ravenhold was announced. She had not expected him.

"I am so glad you came," she says, rising and smiling, as she put her hand into his. "I was feeling rather bored. Tell me something amusing."

"I have come to tell you something," he answers, and, in a moment, she sees there is an unusual constraint in his voice and manner. "I don't know whether you will find it amusing."

Vanessa grows pale; an uneasy sensation creeps through her heart, she shivers ever so little.

Ravenhold takes a chair near hers.

"I have thrown up my part," he says, looking hard at her. "Did you know that I had been acting all this time?"

Vanessa's eyes fall before his; she tries to think of something to say to avert the catastrophe which she feels to be impending. But no inspiration comes to her.

"We have been playing at being friends," he goes on, "and it is a farce, at all events, as far as I am concerned."

"Why should we not be friends?" asks Vanessa, speaking very fast, "it has been so pleasant."

"Has it?" he echoes. "I give you my word of honor it has not been pleasant to me. I have been on the point of breaking out fifty times. It was all a deception from the first. I only made a pretense of friendliness because I was afraid of you; because I thought you would keep your word and show me the door if I ventured to betray my real feelings."

His face is white; the firelight shows the emotion that is working in it.

"Please do not talk so, Lord Ravenhold," says Vanessa, trying to speak coldly. "You know it is useless, and much worse than useless, wrong. Do not let us quarrel just as you are going away."

"I would not have spoken," he says, in a low voice, of which she catches the tremor, "if I had not known, in spite of what you say, that you care for me. Oh, darling——"

He tries to take her hand, but she pushes her chair back sharply and rises to her feet. He rises too.

"Do not touch me!" she cries, in a smothered voice. "If you come a step nearer, I will leave you!"

He stands looking at her, full of fierce emotions of love and anger.

"Why do you keep up this pretense?" he cries, passionately. "You know that we love each other. I have read it in your eyes a hundred times. I ask nothing of you—I hope nothing from you—only confess it once; let me hear it from your own lips, and I shall go away happy."

Vanessa is terrified at his words; at her own feelings—she takes refuge in anger.

"How dare you say such things to me!" she cries. "And it is quite false. I care for no one but my husband. And you pretend to be his friend! Have you no sense of honor?"

"Can I help it?" he says, fiercely. "I wish to God I had never set eyes on you. My life has been a curse to me ever since I have known you."

"It shall be a curse no more," she answers. "I said before I would never see nor speak to you again. This time I mean it."

And before he can guess her intention, she flies to a book-stand and brings out a Bible.

"There!" she cries, panting and trembling as she puts her lips to it, "I swear on this that I will never willingly speak to

you again, and that I will never be alone with you from this moment."

It is positive fear that impels her to this violent step—a dreadful doubt of herself that assails her and makes her mistrust her own strength.

"Now," she cries, "go."

There is something so majestic, so grand in her air, that Ravenhold has no choice but to obey her.

"Will you not at least bid me good-bye?" he says, holding out his hand.

"No!" she cries, and puts both hers behind her back.

"Ah!" he says, bitterly. "Some day you will think of this. Some day when *you* know what it is you will not be so hard—when you are tortured like I am, then, perhaps, you will be sorry!"

He stands a moment waiting for her to repent; but she only sets her teeth harder together and makes another imperious gesture.

So he goes, and when she hears the door close upon him, she flies up-stairs to her room and throws herself on the floor with cries and sobs. And all that night and the next day and the day after, until she knows he is gone, she is tormented by a mad desire to write to him or go to him and put her hand in his and say:

"Forgive me. Good-bye, and God bless you!"

But she conquers it.

CHAPTER XXIII.

GREAT catastrophes do not generally take long to happen. One moment we are smiling and happy, the next our hearts are broken; one moment we are in the flush of health, the next we are crushed and maimed beyond recognition.

John Brandon was hurrying home to his wife. He had got away earlier than he expected from business, and was pleasing himself with the thought of giving her an agreeable surprise. Just as the hansom was within a few yards of his own house, the door opened hastily and a man ran down the steps. It was Lord Ravenhold. Brandon was about to call to him when, by the light of the gas-lamp, he saw the white excited look on the young man's face. Instantly it struck him that he had been declaring his passion to his wife. As yet, however, no misgiving crossed his brain—his confidence in Vanessa was unbounded; indeed, he felt half disposed to be sorry for the lad.

He went up-stairs into the drawing-room. It was empty, and the door stood open; he looked into the unfinished boudoir, but all was darkness. Then he went up to her room by way of his dressing-room. His hand was on the door when a sound from within made him pause. He listened. Again and again there came convulsive sobs and cries smothered but heart-breaking. Then, suddenly, as he stood there, the truth flashed upon him; the awful, bitter truth. She loved Ravenhold. Softly, lest she should hear him, he went and sat down in a chair and leaned his

head against the back of it and clasped his hands tight together. What a blind fool he had been these last thirteen months, to think that the love of a common-place, middle-aged man was enough to satisfy a beautiful young woman just entering upon life! He remembered now all his misgivings before he married her; his conviction that when she saw young handsome men she would feel that he had taken an unfair advantage of her ignorance of the world. He recalled her fits of crying, her changeable moods; he understood them now; they were the outcome of her disappointment, the evidence of an unsatisfied heart. If he had read them earlier, if instead of his blind foolish confidence in himself and in her love, he had looked for the cause and grasped it, might things have gone differently?

He did not blame her, no jealous rage against Ravenhold rushed into his heart. He felt nothing but an immense pity for them, an immense regret that he stood between his beloved and happiness. He knew now how right his first impulse had been to wait until she had had the opportunity of seeing other men, and how wrongly he had done afterward in snatching at his happiness for fear it should evade him. Thirteen months of bliss, and oh! at this moment how far more he prized it, how far dearer it seemed to him, than it had done whilst it was his! And now it was gone. He could never be happy again; remorse would always stand between him and her; he would always suspect, however kind and affectionate she might be to him, that her heart was with that other. He had perfect confidence in her outward fidelity; he did not for one instant doubt but that she had repulsed any overtures Ravenhold had made; his face bore token to his suffering and disappointment. At this moment another stifled sob struck on Brandon's ear. It pierced his very soul; he shut his ears not to hear, and then an impulse seized him to go to her, to gather her to his aching heart and to comfort her. If he had done so, how well it would have been for both! If Vanessa could have known that he was there, broken-hearted and guessing all, she might have gone to him; have laid her head on his faithful breast and forgotten Ravenhold. But Fate arranges matters her own way and stands and jeers at our helplessness and blindness the while, most of all at our delusion in thinking we are free agents.

After a time, Brandon went down into his own room and took a book, that he might pretend to be reading if any one should enter.

And there, Vanessa, with a smiling face and shining eyes, followed by her pug, finds him. The dog jumps on him and makes much of him, and his mistress says in a gay tone:

"Why, Johnnie, have you come in and never been to see me?" and she stoops and kisses the top of his head.

"I went into the drawing-room," he answers, "but you were not there."

He cannot meet her eyes; he has a guilty feeling as if he had gained possession of her secret by unfair means.

All that evening he remarks that her manner is unnatural and constrained: that she affects extreme gayety and liveliness;

but, if his sense of observation had not been quickened by his knowledge, he would have noticed nothing forced in her manner and would have imagined her to be in the best of spirits. Vanessa was so taken up with playing her own part that she did not perceive how sad and depressed her husband was, and that he was making an immense effort to talk. It might have struck her as odd that he did not once mention Lord Ravenhold, who was rather a favorite topic with him, but she was only too thankful at not being called upon to utter his name.

The next day it did certainly occur to her to wonder how she could account to him for Lord Ravenhold not coming to bid her good-bye, but she was relieved from this difficulty by a note which Brandon handed her when he came home in the afternoon.

"Here is a note from Ravenhold," he said, in a matter-of-fact tone, and then went out of the room.

Vanessa read:

"DEAR BRANDON,—I hope you and Mrs. Brandon will not think me very rude for not coming to wish you good-bye and to thank you for all your kindness and hospitality. I am suddenly called away, and shall not be in town again before I start. Once more, many thanks. Please make my excuses to Mrs. Brandon. If I am lucky enough to kill a tiger, I will send her the skin.

"Yours ever,

"RAVENHOLD."

Vanessa read it twice. How dry and cold it seemed! What men write (to a woman's mind) very often counterbalances what they say. She goes to the window and presses her forehead against the pane, and clinches her teeth and her hands to keep the tears back. He is going away—he will amuse himself—he will forget—it is always the woman's doom to stay behind and think. *To think!* oh, cruel pain! to act! blessed anodyne! Men act and women think.

The months pass. Husband and wife both suffer in silence, whilst outwardly their manner to each other undergoes no change, except that, perhaps, there is even a greater show of kindness and affection between them. Brandon suffers the most, because he suffers for her as well as for himself—he is constantly trying to read her thoughts—he is afraid of caressing her for fear he should repel and disgust her, however well she may appear to receive his affection. But there he is wrong. She is still devoted to him, in a different way from formerly; his kindness and affection comfort and soothe her. She forbids herself to cherish thoughts of Ravenhold—what she suffers is that immense void which the absence of the being who has called forth the deepest feeling of our lives creates. It is the weariness which comes from the quiet routine of domestic life when the mental palate has been stimulated by unnatural food—by excitement and strong emotions. Fashionable women, when attacked by pangs of the heart, plunge into a vortex of so-called gaiety to drown them, with what success each one knows who

comes home jaded and weary in body but suffering none the less keenly in mind. Vanessa longed to take refuge in society from the monotony of her life, but, just at this season, very few of her friends were in town, and there was little going on.

In December, Mrs. Fane came to Grosvenor Place, and the two ladies saw a good deal of each other as long as she remained. One wet afternoon, they were sitting over the boudoir fire. Mrs. Fane had given orders that no one was to be admitted.

"I am quite sure there is not a creature in town I want to see," she says, laughing. "So there is no chance of the usual retribution falling upon me of the very person being sent away whom I most want to see. It is such a bore having lost Peregrine. He used, by some marvelous intuition, to know exactly who the people were I wished to see and when I did not want to be disturbed. I never remember his making a mistake. This man is utterly unimaginative, and only does just what he is told to the very letter. He has no idea that there could be any exceptions to my 'not at home,' and I cannot very well give him a list. Then there would be complications, because certain people might be on the list whom I wanted to see separately but not together. Peregrine understood it all. Why will your favorite butler always marry your favorite maid and leave you to set up a lodging house? I suppose none of us know when we are well off."

And the little lady sighs.

"Now, my dear," she continues, "we will enjoy ourselves. We will have tea and be cozy—if we have anything to say we will talk, and if not, we will be silent. What a comfort it is when two people get beyond company manners and are no longer afraid of a pause in the conversation!"

So they chat and drink their tea—the room is charmingly half lighted in a manner inviting to reverie—beautiful green and blue lights are burning fitfully in a log of old ship wood on the fire, and presently the pair relapse into silence.

Men are wrong who assert that there is never any genuine friendship between women. I doubt if two men ever feel so happy and contented in each other's society as two women do who are really congenial to and fond of each other. Of course the disturbing element which men hold to be inevitable may creep in, but many women prize the friendship of one of their own sex too highly to sacrifice it to vanity or a passing caprice.

Where are Vanessa's thoughts and where Hermione's? Looking hard at them, one may read in their faces that something in each heart goes to mar that outward personal *bien-etre* which the charm of their surroundings gives them.

There has been a silence of considerable duration: then Mrs. Fane, glancing across at Vanessa, says:

"What a happy woman you are! I don't suppose you have even that one traditional crumpled rose-leaf to disturb your comfort!"

Vanessa looks up and smiles. If Hermione were not rooted in her conviction of Mrs. Brandon's well-being, she might per-

ceive that the smile is not altogether that of a serenely happy woman.

"I am not a sentimental person," pursues Hermione; "indeed, most people say that I have not an atom of heart, but I am quite sure," with conviction, "that the only thing which can make one happy is love. I don't mean what most people understand by the word; I mean a good, pure, wholesome, lasting love. Oh, Nessa!" and the little lady's eyes fill with tears, "if I had had your chances, what a different woman I should have been!"

She does not read the trouble in Vanessa's eyes, nor guess in the remotest manner that she has stabbed her friend.

"I dare say," she goes on, looking into the fire and with a certain tremulousness in her voice—"I dare say you think I am a heartless little butterfly, bent solely on amusing myself; you have heard me jeer at love and domestic bliss; I have pretended to laugh at you sometimes. It is because," with a little sob, "I don't want the world to know the truth. I should hate people, most people, to think that I suffer. I like them to envy me; when your friends pity you, they always despise you a little at the same time. But I don't mind you," and Hermione leaves her chair and comes and sits on the rug at Vanessa's feet.

Vanessa stoops and kisses her bright hair.

"And I always thought you were the happiest woman in the world," she says.

"If you knew!" utters Hermione, her lips quivering. "But," with something of her usual vivacity, "after all, one of the greatest consolations in life is that you can take people in; that you can make them envy you and think you tremendously happy, when all the time you are eating your heart out. How delighted they would be if they knew! How they would grin and chuckle! It is a very horrid trait in human nature, that being so awfully pleased when our friends come to grief, or are disappointed and mortified."

"Oh, my dear," interrupts Vanessa, "how can you think so badly of human nature?"

"It is gospel truth," replies Mrs. Fane, gravely; "that is, of society's human nature; nothing is so delightful to people as their friend's misfortune. They seem somehow to think that your moral and social failures do them good and help them on. If you break your leg, or have a dreadful illness, perhaps they may be sorry, unless they want you kept out of the way; but if you lose your money or your reputation, or suffer some great social disappointment, they rejoice. Oh, yes, my dear, they do. I have known the feeling myself, although I am bound to say I had the decency to be ashamed of it, and to pretend that I was very sorry. There was a time," half laughing, half serious, "when I envied you so much that I believe it would have done me good to hear that Mr. Brandon beat you and swore at you in private, or that you were secretly in love with some other man. But now," pressing Vanessa's hand affectionately, "I am so fond of you that I rejoice at your happiness and don't envy it a bit, though I should like to share it."

Vanessa makes a great effort to stifle the sigh which oppresses

her heart, to keep back the tears that tremble on her eyelids. Hermione is not looking at her, but into the fitful-colored flame.

"What pleasure is there in rushing about from place to place after excitement," she pursues, "in dancing and flirting and spending heaps of money in trying to amuse one's self and failing utterly to do it, when you know there is only one thing in the world that could make you happy? If I had a man whom I dared to love, who loved me better than any one in the world, I would give up all the rest to-morrow. If I could lay my head on his heart and feel his hand clasp mine, and tell him every thought that came into my heart just as it came, and know that he sympathized with it and loved everything I said and did because I said and did it, I would give up riches, and society, and vanity to-morrow. I mean if I could do it lawfully. The other thing isn't worth having; it is a torment, an uncertainty, an agonizing dread, a few hours of madness and the remorse of all your life. I could never be such a fool as to do wrong. I can conjecture too well what it feels like afterward."

Vanessa listens, and finds no word to answer. Then Hermione lifts her eyes to her friend's face and says, in a broken voice:

"Oh, my dear, if you knew how bad it is to have a husband who hates and curses you, who, you know, would rejoice if you died, or if misfortune befell you."

"Hush, dear," interrupts Vanessa, stroking her hair—"do not talk like that! Every one knows that if your husband does not appreciate you, it is his own fault."

"Ah!" says Hermione, with tears raining down her face, "that does not take the sting away. If twenty men would give their lives for me to-morrow: if a hundred thought I was the best and nicest woman in the world, it would not make it one whit less bitter to me that the one who ought to love and care for me hates me. Why should he? I feel it and resent it every time I think of it. He may be a lout, and have low tastes, but, all the same, I feel it a disgrace to be hated by him. Ah, if you knew what it is to me sometimes to think that I am living on his money, that he is tied to me and cannot get away from me, though he loathes his chain! It drives me almost mad. I have wild thoughts of going away somewhere, and living on my own miserable five hundred a year. You see I have all this"—with a wave of her hand—"from him, but he gets absolutely nothing from me, and it makes me feel mean. I hate and despise him, and yet I cannot help seeing his side of the case. That woman who is his mistress would be his wife if it were not for me—his children would be legitimate, and he would not be living in open sin. She may be a low woman—she might perhaps have been a disgrace to the family; but he loves her, and it is a greater disgrace as it is."

"But," exclaims Vanessa, anxious to soothe her, "it was no fault of yours—you did not know of it. You thought he was fond of you; you meant to be a good wife to him."

"Shall I tell you what I think?" says Hermione, raising her eyes to her friend's face with so mournful an expression that no one would have recognized the gay Mrs. Fane. "This is

my idea about marriage. I am not very religious. Most people probably imagine that I have not a spark of anything but worldliness in me, but that does not alter the fact. I think that when you mean to marry, you should ask yourself first if you love the man; not if you think you can just tolerate him, but whether you can *love* him, whether, if he lost his fortune, or title, or whatever it might be, you could face the world with him, and feel that, no matter what came, if you had each other, you could bear the rest. And then you ought to ask God's blessing on your marriage, and you ought to be able to feel as if He approved of it. When I married, I married simply because I thought the best thing in life was to have lots of money and a good position. I knew I did not love Mr. Fane, although he was not repulsive to me. His touch did not make my flesh creep—women *do* marry men to whom they feel like that—does it not seem too horrible! But I never thought about God in the matter—my whole mind was occupied with the idea that I was making a good match, that the settlements were all right, and that I should be able to spend as much money on my dress as I liked. And my punishment has been quite a fair one, I suppose," Hermione ends up, thoughtfully. "I asked for money, and freedom, and what the world values. I have got them. I never thought of asking for God's blessing and my husband's love, and I have had to do without them."

And then silence, a long silence, falls upon the two beautiful women as they sit, hand clasping hand, each intent on her own thoughts.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AGAIN Hermione is the first to break the silence.

"I cannot help smiling now," she says, "when I think how frightened I was about you and Gerard. Do you remember my little 'word in season'? I suppose I shared the popular impression that if a man is young and handsome, and has charming manners, he is dangerous to the peace of mind of every woman he wishes to be dangerous to. But, solemnly, you are the first woman with whom I ever knew him fail."

And, with this, Hermione looks smilingly up at her friend. She sees a white face, a quivering lip, and humid eyes, and the sight gives her a strange shock. A sudden suspicion crosses her brain. She looks away, and goes on talking quickly.

"One has such ridiculous ideas. As if it mattered two pins what a man is like! I wonder whether he will have good sport. Dear me! I think men are very happy to have so much freedom and so many things to amuse them. I wish to goodness I could go away to the ends of the earth, and hunt or shoot wild animals, and get some new kind of excitement!"

"Yes," answers Vanessa, rousing herself to speak cheerfully, "I think men have the best of it."

"Or women who have to earn their own living," suggests Hermione. "We idle women are immensely to be pitied. And, sometimes, when I am driving, I see poor women staring at me

with envious faces, and wondering (I can read in their eyes) why life should be so unfair, and why I should have so much, and they so little. They wouldn't believe me if I were to stop—as I feel inclined to sometimes—and say, 'You think I am happy. You never made a greater mistake in your life. Of the two, I will be bound to say you are a great deal less wretched than I am.' They don't understand the doctrine of compensation; I do."

"I suspect one is very ungrateful," says Vanessa, sighing. "When one has so many blessings, one ought to be happy."

"And so we would if we could, my dear," replies Hermione. "I am sure no one is voluntarily unhappy. Even with the people who are most unreasonably discontented, it is not their fault. They have livers, or something wrong with their internal machinery."

"Your carriage is here, ma'am," announces the butler at this moment to Vanessa.

"Oh, don't go yet!" pleads Hermione.

"I think I must," returns Vanessa rising. "My husband will be expecting me."

"Oh, these devoted wives!" laughs Mrs. Fane; but after Vanessa is gone she sits ruminating long as to what may have been the interpretation of the emotion in her friend's face, when Ravenhold's name was mentioned.

All that evening Vanessa is more than usually affectionate and caressing to her husband. He smiles at her; he holds her hand, and returns her kisses. She never dreams that his heart is aching ten times worse than hers; and that he is saying to himself:

"She does this from a sense of duty. She has been talking of Ravenhold to his sister, and thinking of him, and she looks upon this as a reparation to me for an involuntary wrong. Poor child! God blesses her! How gladly would I sacrifice myself if I could make her happy!"

Brandon's heart bleeds inwardly. He is forever thinking of her, and imagining her sufferings to be ten times greater than they are. He looks forward to Ravenhold's return with apprehension; not because he doubts her for one moment in his loyal heart, but because he sees that it will be an ordeal for her, and that she will be torn in two between love and duty. And, though he loves her more than his life, if he could set her free and give her to the man who could make her happier than he, he would do it. But when two people are lawfully chained together, the rivet can only be broken by dishonor, disgrace, or death. And death is the weapon that Fate chooses to dissolve a union which once was, and which promised always to be, as happy as any she ever permitted.

In bitter March weather Brandon caught cold, and treated it in the way in which many strong people treat a cold, as a disagreeable but by no means dangerous disorder. He went about as usual, and then got inflammation of the lungs.

Once prostrate, once convinced of the seriousness of his state, he made up his mind that he should die. They say, when that

is the case, a man generally dies, just as when one makes up his mind that he will live, he frequently pulls through. Here was a way out of the trouble that until now he had never calculated upon. Has any reader ever been so nigh the gates of death as to look it full in the face, to grasp all the agony of parting from what he loves, of seeing his own vacant place, and *knowing* that those who stand beside him, seemingly broken-hearted, will ere long be laughing again, occupying themselves with business or pleasure, and that in time he will be quite forgotten? Has he suffered a yet more cruel pang? Has he seen in fancy that dear form which he has loved better than his own soul given into the arms of another—another who rejoices whilst he lies cold, forgotten in his narrow grave? If he has, he will conjecture something of the pangs that rent John Brandon's breast. How hard, poor fellow, he tried to stifle them!—how nobly and generously he tried to say, "O God, let her be happy, and do what Thou wilt with me!" His affairs were all in order, he had left everything he possessed in the world to his "dear wife;" there was no selfish clause or condition attached. Careful beyond all things for her peace of mind he enforced strictly on the doctor that Vanessa should not be allowed to suspect his danger.

She waited on him like an angel of tenderness. Now Ravenhold had not the very smallest place in her heart or thoughts—she felt nothing but love and anxiety for the man who had been so good to her, and to whom she felt herself utterly and solely devoted.

The colonel came to see him, and tried to look cheerful, and to speak encouragingly, but men are poor hands at dissembling by a sick-bed, and the colonel was sure he read death in Brandon's face.

"I want to speak to you," said the latter, as they were alone together. "Just turn the key in the lock, that we may not be interrupted."

The colonel obeys him.

"I don't think you ought to talk much, my dear fellow," he says, coming back, for Brandon's voice is weak.

"I won't say very much," and then he grasps the colonel's hand, and, for a moment, emotion chokes him.

"Don't, my dear, dear old chap, agitate yourself!" implores the colonel. "Wait till you are stronger."

"I shall never be stronger," answers Brandon, recovering himself with a faint smile. "I am dying."

"No, no!" cries the colonel, with a sob in his throat. "You must not say that. Think of your poor wife; it will break her heart."

"Yes. She will feel it sadly, poor little girl! That is what I want to say to you. Do all you can to comfort her; be her friend—be as much as you can with her; tell her how I loved her, and how happy she made my life—how I valued her love! Tell her that no man in this world was ever so happy as she made me. And then in a year or two—if she should come across some good fellow who you think would make her happy" (and here poor Brandon almost breaks down, whilst the colonel grasps

his hand, and gives short, gasping sobs, and the tears rain down his face), "tell her—tell her that I wished it: that I should be happier in another world to know she was happy—and—God in heaven bless her!"

Then Brandon sank back on his pillows almost unconscious, and the colonel, terrified, thinking the end was near, went hurriedly himself to fetch the doctor, who lived close by. Luckily he found him at home.

"Oh," said the colonel, with a white face, "can nothing be done? *Must* he die?"

"He may pull through, but I am very much afraid," answered the doctor.

"What will his poor wife do?" ejaculated the kind-hearted colonel, whose heart was rent in twain.

A few days later John Brandon died, and Vanessa believed that her heart was broken. She passionately desired to die. How gladly, she thought, would she take that last long journey in company with the man who had been all the world to her. For the memory of Ravenhold was swept away as clean as though he was dead or she had never known him. An awful desolation filled her heart, she forgot the disappointment, the unsatisfied longings of the last few months; her memory reverted to the time when they two had been all and all to each other; she only thought of him as the man who had filled her life with love and happiness—the man without whom life seemed now impossible—a burden too grievous to be borne.

The colonel telegraphed at once for Mr. Wentworth, and he came, but, from his want of knowledge of the world, he was neither capable of attending to business matters, nor could he offer his daughter (deeply as he felt for her) any but the tritest consolations. It was the colonel who did everything, saw to everything, who was her right hand, and gave her the only faint gleam of comfort which she knew.

When she took leave of him to go home to the Vicarage with her father, as it had been arranged she should, she broke into bitter tears and sobs.

"What shall I do without you?" she cried, feeling as though the last link between her and happiness was snapped, and he pressed her hand over and over again, and the tears stood in his honest eyes, and he promised to go down and see her ere long.

The wretched, desolate weeks dragged their slow length along. Vanessa wondered in dumb agony how a human heart could endure such torture and still live on. The faithful Susan spent all her energies in trying to comfort her darling, but she felt that here was a grief beyond her humble power to console.

Every hour of the day poor Vanessa said to herself, "This time last year how happy I was!" and she magnified all her past joys and pleasures tenfold. Now she looked upon her life as forever done and ended—it filled her with a cold horror to think she was so young, and had all those long years of misery in front of her. If a thought of loving or marrying again had come to her, she would have cast it from her as a horrid sacrilege, but in truth it did not come, at all events for weeks and

months after Brandon's death. The first gleam of happiness she knew was when Colonel Dallas paid them his promised visit. The season was at its height, but London seasons had no very great charm for him now, and he was glad to comfort the poor girl for whom he had so tender and chivalrous an affection. He stayed a month, and Vanessa grew almost cheerful. When he left, it seemed to open all her wounds afresh. I am disposed to think, if he had proposed to marry and take her away, she would have consented from sheer loneliness and want of companionship. Then came three months of intolerable suffering—the months in which she had first lived and loved. How she yearned and ached for that dear heart on which she had been wont to lay her head, for those kind sheltering arms! And she was here alone, widowed, desolate.

Mrs. Vaughan and Edith came for a fortnight to the Hall—Mabel was married. It was a break in Vanessa's misery, but when Edith went away again, she was more desolate than ever.

Then she began to think of Ravenhold—to wonder bitterly if he had forgotten her—if he had only been playing with her heart—if his love had been an unworthy one, that ceased to exist when he might lawfully cherish it. She had heard from his uncle that he was back from India, but he made no sign. In her heart she drew bitter comparisons between him and her husband; she remembered with a sense of burning shame that she had almost forgotten her allegiance to a man who was so true and just and noble, for one who was simply heartless and selfish, and bent only on the gratification of the hour.

When the colonel came on a second visit to the Vicarage, he saw that Vanessa's loneliness was telling upon her. Change she must have—any change. He talked very seriously to her father, and then, as a first little break in the monotony, he suggested a fortnight's visit to the neighboring seaport town of B—. He went with them. The change, the sea air did Vanessa good, and then the colonel made a further suggestion.

"My dear child," he said, "you cannot go on leading this life; it will kill you in time. And why should you? You are a comparatively rich woman; there is your house in town waiting for you. Of course you could not have remained in it last season, naturally you would not have wished to do so, but now it is different. Make up your mind to go back there next month, and let me look out for a companion for you."

Vanessa shook her head at first; she could never return to London life, nor visit nor mix with people again. But the colonel urged, and at last she consented, mostly, I think, because she hoped to see more of him by doing so.

When she again took possession of her home it seemed to bring back all her grief afresh. Here she had lived and been happy with Brandon in the early days of marriage, when, at least, there had been no disenchantment or disappointment. And now, instead of laying her head on that dear heart and twining her arms round his neck, she had to sit exchanging cold platitudes with a *dame de compagnie*. The only time she ever felt cheerful was when the colonel dined with her, and to him the house began to

be a sort of home. She liked to talk about Brandon, and the colonel was quite content to listen to her and join in her praises whilst he drank his dead friend's claret and smoked his fine cigars. Nothing less than the best of everything was good enough in Vanessa's eyes to give to any one she cared for. That is a trait almost peculiar to the sex. There are a good many generous men, but a good many more generous women, only that it rarely happens to the latter to have opportunities for the display of this virtue.

Mrs. Fane came to see Vanessa once as she passed through London. She did not seem to Mrs. Brandon quite the same as formerly. Was she afraid of her now that she was free, and had she other ideas for her brother? This thought stole involuntarily into Vanessa's mind. She said to herself, with some scorn against herself, that there seemed little ground for any fears about Lord Ravenhold thinking of her; he had not called, nor, as far as she knew, sent even an ordinary message of condolence to her. Hermione had not mentioned his name. The colonel rarely spoke of him, and something in Vanessa's own consciousness prevented her from alluding to him. She was none the less eager to have news of him. Frequently a question would rise to her lips, and, ere they framed it, she would blush, her heart would almost chide her, and the fear of betraying herself kept her silent. But at last one evening, as they sat together over the fire, the companion having discreetly effaced herself, Vanessa summoned up resolution enough to speak. Her face was turned to the fire; she held a feather screen in her hand, with which, if needs must, she could hide her blushes, and suddenly, *a propos* of nothing, she said:

"Where is Lord Ravenhold now?"

Even as she spoke she had a shamed consciousness that the colonel would suspect the instinct that prompted her question; would guess that she had some hope or thought of him.

At her words the colonel looked into the fire and frowned a little.

"He has been getting himself into rather a nasty scrape, and he is keeping quiet."

"Oh," and Vanessa tried to still her beating heart, and to look only interested as a friend or acquaintance might.

"All that confounded hereditary complaint!" pursued the colonel. "I knew it would get him into trouble one of these days."

There was no color in Vanessa's cheek now—an icy sensation crept to her heart. She guessed what was coming, but could not command her voice sufficiently to utter a single word.

"It seems," the colonel went on, "that he met a woman out in India and fell in love with her. And they came home together in the same boat. Well," hesitating, "the husband only heard about it a month ago, and he has instituted proceedings in the divorce court."

"Oh!" said Vanessa, in a voice she scarcely recognized as her own. "And I suppose that—that Lord Ravenhold will marry the lady?"

"I suppose he ought to," replied the colonel, ruminatively. "But whether he will is a different matter, and remains to be seen."

Vanessa sat long into the night, when every one else was sleeping. One more hope died with bitter pangs and throes.

And once she had thought the world fair, and that there was a heaven even on this side the gates of death!

CHAPTER XXV.

AT the Hall there is one of those charming, old-fashioned kitchen-gardens such as one rarely meets nowadays. It is inclosed by brick walls with eaves; entered by a pair of handsome iron and gilt gates set in square stone pillars, surmounted by huge balls. Looking through these gates you can see a broad green walk of beautifully kept turf, bordered on either side by gorgeous, flaming masses of old-fashioned flowers. At the end of the green vista is a nut-walk, dividing the vegetable garden from the orchard, and beyond this a labyrinth.

Here one bright June afternoon Vanessa and Edith Vaughan are wandering together. Vanessa still wears deep mourning, although she has discarded her widow's cap; it is now fifteen months since John Brandon died. The garden has become a favorite resort of the two friends—here they are free from all probability of interruption, and can indulge their sorrow and exchange their sympathy unobserved. Vanessa lives in the past—she has magnified her dead husband into a hero, and has quite forgotten that she was ever dull and disappointed in his lifetime. Edith, in spite of mother and grandfather, has given up the world and society. She too thinks life holds nothing more for her—the Algy in whom she trusted so profoundly has proved faithless and sold himself to a handsome widow with a considerable fortune. Edith will never more, she vows, believe in man's promises. She is at the Hall alone with her maid now, but Vanessa bears her constant company. It is a pathetic sight to see these two young creatures, one of whom is positively beautiful, and the other pretty enough to be interesting, leaning upon each other's arms, and telling each other beneath the blue sky and in the bright sunshine how sad a place God's earth is. They think so most sincerely, and speculate mournfully about the purpose of their creation only to suffer so hapless a lot. To-day they are saying over again to each other what they have said a thousand times before; saying it with as much earnestness, as much interest, as though they had struck out a new line of thought.

"I suppose men are different from women," says Edith, with a voice full of bitter yearning. "I should always have been faithful to him. Did I not go through all sorts of persecution for his sake, and did I ever waver?"

"No, my poor darling," utters Vanessa, tenderly. "And when he talked to me about you, he seemed so intensely devoted, I could not have believed it possible for him to change."

"I could almost have forgiven him," murmurs Edith, with

tears in her eyes, "if he had not cared for her. But they say he is quite in love with her."

"He was not worthy of you," says Vanessa, affectionately, "if he could change so soon."

"And now," utters Edith, "my life is done and over—I have nothing to look forward to."

"Don't talk like that, darling," entreats Vanessa. "Some day you will forget him and care for some one better worth caring for. You are not so desolate as I am."

"I am more so, because I have lost all faith. If you met a man you could love, there would be nothing to prevent your marrying him; but I should be always full of doubts. I could never have confidence in one again."

"My love is buried in the grave," says Vanessa, solemnly, looking far away at the blue sky, whilst two big tears tremble on her eyelids.

Silence follows. Presently Edith, turning suddenly on her friend, says:

"Do you know, Nessa, I have always been expecting that Lord Ravenhold would come back and marry you."

A flood of crimson overspreads Mrs. Brandon's face.

"Edie!" she cries, almost indignantly. "I never thought to hear this from you!"

"Don't be vexed, darling!" implores her friend. "It has been on the tip of my tongue a thousand times, and I have always stopped myself. Of course that Indian affair was very wrong and wicked, but I know he was dreadfully in love with you the summer before last, and, *of course*, I know that you never gave him a thought. Shall I tell you what I fancied? I fancied that he went to India because he was unhappy about you and——"

"It looks like it, does it not?" echoes Vanessa, scornfully.

"I dare say it was only in sheer despair about you," says Edith, tentatively. "Men are not like we are—they can console themselves with another woman for the one they cannot have."

"Lord Ravenhold could never have been anything to me," answers Vanessa, coldly. "And you are quite mistaken about his caring for me. I should think you must be convinced of that by this time."

"No, I am not," returns Edith, sturdily. "I can imagine that, after that miserable *esclandre*, he was ashamed to come near you; but if he had cared for the other woman, he would have married her after the divorce, as in honor he was almost bound to do."

"Perhaps he has married her," says Vanessa, with a slightly heightened color.

"Oh, no, he has not. I suppose you heard that ridiculous story which was got up about his going through the ceremony with her and leaving her at the church door. There was not one word of truth in it. He has been out of England for the last eight months."

"When he comes back," says Mrs. Brandon, counterfeiting a

light manner, "he will find a bride awaiting him. Now that Lady Mildred's husband has broken his neck so conveniently, they will be able to marry and be happy ever after."

Her tone betrays her to Edith's keen ear. She is certain now of what she suspected before, that her friend is not so entirely indifferent to Lord Ravenhold as she would persuade the world, and perhaps herself.

At this moment an incident happens, which is by no means an uncommon one, although, when it occurs, it seems to partake a little of the supernatural. A servant comes to announce to Miss Vaughan that Lord Ravenhold is in the drawing-room. Edith receives the intelligence with perfect calmness, but Mrs. Brandon changes from white to red, trembles, and has to turn away to conceal her agitation.

"How strange that we should just have been talking of him!" remarks Edith, as the servant departs. "Come"—rising—"let us go and hear what he has to say for himself."

"I will stay here," answers Vanessa.

"Indeed you will do nothing of the sort," cries Edith, taking her by the arm. "You will come with me?"

"No," answers Vanessa, with resolution, "I would much rather not."

"You forget," exclaims Edith, half smiling, half bitter, "that I cannot receive a young man unchaperoned. It would not be the thing. You must come to play propriety."

Vanessa wavers for an instant; then she says, with ill-concealed agitation:

"Please, Edie, don't press me! I should particularly dislike to meet him."

So Edith goes away alone without another word, and Vanessa sits trembling, her heart throbbing violently, every nerve quivering anxiously and painfully, her hands twisted, and working one in the other. But she is quite persuaded still that all her love, all her power of feeling it, is buried in Brandon's grave.

Edith finds Lord Ravenhold looking as handsome, as debonair, as fascinating as ever. There is no suspicion of the humility and shamefacedness of the returned prodigal about him; he does not look meek and penitent; all she sees in his expression is a shade of well-concealed disappointment at her entrance alone. He greets her very cheerily all the same.

"I heard you were here," he says, "and, as I was not very far off, I rode over."

He does not think it necessary to tell her what brought him into the neighborhood. She is very welcome to guess.

Of course she replies it is very good of him to come. She is so very sorry that being alone here, she cannot offer him any hospitality. And he rejoins that he only rode over on the chance of having half an hour's chat.

"It must be awfully dull for you, here all alone, is it not?" he asks, whereupon Edith answers him according to the desire expressed in his eyes.

"I am not at all dull," she says; "Mrs. Brandon is constantly with me."

Then all his face lights up.

"I called at the Vicarage on my way here, and they told me Mrs. Brandon was with you."

"She is in the garden," answers Edith. "Shall we go and find her?"

This young lady perfectly understands that Lord Ravenhold has come for the express purpose of meeting Mrs. Brandon. She thinks it more than probable that he is here with the intention of proposing, or leading up to a proposal to make Vanessa Lady Ravenhold, and she considers the marriage, in spite of his lordship's vagaries, an eminently suitable and desirable one.

Ravenhold starts up with joyous alacrity, and they go out of the French windows together, and take their way to the old kitchen-garden. But when they arrive at the spot where Edith left Mrs. Brandon, the bird is flown.

Edith stands still and looks round, in the hope of catching sight of her friend walking in one of the alleys.

"What can have become of her?" she utters, in a vexed tone. "I left her here."

Ravenhold's face falls; a sense of irritation steals across him. The past comes flying back. When did Mrs. Brandon ever do anything but vex and thwart him?

The gardens at the hall are so large that it is somewhat of a forlorn quest to hunt any one there who wishes to conceal himself, but Edith has a good deal of resolution in her character. So she conducts Ravenhold to such places as she thinks it possible Vanessa may have secreted herself in, feeling all the time anything but pleased at that young lady's perversity, and sympathizing heartily with her companion's ill-disguised disappointment. Having unsuccessfully questioned several gardeners, she comes upon one who is able to give tidings of the fugitive. He has just seen Mrs. Brandon sitting in the arbor near the ornamental water. Unconsciously, Ravenhold quickens his pace so much that Edith can scarcely keep up with him. And when at last he comes face to face with the beautiful and adored woman of his dreams, his eyes light up with a look of such joy that no one, seeing him, could entertain a moment's doubt about his feelings for her. Vanessa blushes; her heart beats fast, and then, suddenly, according to an unaccountable impulse only known to her sex, she freezes herself up in a wall of ice, and looks at and behaves to Lord Ravenhold with an indifference which would be somewhat wanting in politeness to an utter stranger. If he addresses her, she just answers him, but she leaves the brunt of the conversation to her friend, who is having as disagreeable a time as a third person generally does when one, at least, of the other pair is a lover.

Miss Vaughan racks her brain for an excuse to leave them, and, seeing a gardener at a little distance, is about to interview him, when Vanessa, detecting her intention, rises also, putting her hand through Edith's arm.

"I shall not be a moment," says Edith, innocently—"I want to speak to Jenkins."

"My dear," returns Vanessa, calmly, "it can be nothing which will not keep for half an hour."

"Yes, it is," smiles Edith.

"Then we will come too," replies Vanessa, provokingly.

"But it is a secret," says Edith.

"That decides the matter," answers Vanessa. "I could not think of allowing you and Jenkins to have a secret. Could I, Lord Ravenhold?" with a touch of the old malice.

But Ravenhold is too piqued and angry to answer. His face wears a flush of anger; he bites his neither lip, and viciously does to death a spider with his riding-whip.

So, perforce, Edith remains, and tries her very best to make conversation. But Mrs. Brandon does not second her, and Lord Ravenhold is distinctly sulky. At last, in sheer despair, he rises to take his leave. But, since he has come all the way from London to see this perverse beauty, he feels it impossible to go back there without any more satisfaction than he has already got. So, holding out his hand in farewell to her, he says, in a tone half wrathful, half pleading:

"May I call upon you to-morrow at the Vicarage?" and she answers, calmly:

"You are very kind, Lord Ravenhold, but we never receive visitors now."

He bows stiffly. The little mournful emphasis on the "now" exasperates him intensely. It says, as it is intended to say, "Now that I have lost the only man I could ever, by any possibility, have cared for." He stalks away toward the house by Edith's side in utter silence, and she feels too sorry for him to attempt anything commonplace. When they are quite out of earshot of the arbor, he stands suddenly still and looks beseechingly at her.

"I know you are sympathetic," he says, in a troubled voice. "I am awfully distressed at the way in which Mrs. Brandon has received me. I came all the way from town to see her. I don't mind telling you. I *must* speak to her. I suppose she thinks me a blackguard; of course she cannot know the truth of that wretched miserable story. I ought not even to allude to it before you, but forgive me, I am so upset and unhappy!"

And he takes her hand and gives her one of those looks which few women have ever been able to withstand. As, moreover, the woman does not live who can resist an appeal for sympathy from a very handsome young man whose affections she does not desire personally to engage, Edith ranges herself instantly on his side, and says, with the kindest smile:

"Go back to her now."

"God bless you!" utters Ravenhold, with heartfelt fervor; and, needing no second bidding, he retraces his eager steps with a beating heart to where he left the only woman who exists for him.

Vanessa, meantime, has suffered the sharpest pangs of remorse. She has learned in those few moments that the power

of loving is not dead in her heart; the sight of Ravenhold has stirred a strange emotion in her, and now she feels as if some insane impulse had made her voluntarily reject the greatest bliss life holds.

For all that, the moment his eager, winsome face appears in the doorway, the same impulse returns with tenfold force, and causes her to greet him with a look of chill surprise, as though he were an unwelcome intruder.

He breaks at once into his confession, unwarned by her look and manner.

"I have come all this way to see you. I could not leave you so, and go away wretched. I want you, at least, to know the truth."

"Pray, Lord Ravenhold, say nothing about it," answers Vanessa, in a voice so cold that she scarcely recognizes it as her own. "Your affairs can have no possible interest for me, and I scarcely think they would bear discussing."

He stands leaning against the side of the entrance, his head thrown back, his mouth quivering visibly under his mustache; one might almost fancy a suspicion of tears in his handsome eyes.

"I suppose," he says presently, with an effort, "it is always to be the same. You never had a kind word for me yet. You never did anything but wound and hurt me."

"I think you are a little unreasonable," returns Vanessa, touched but unwilling to show it. "I am not the keeper of your conscience, and," with renewed coldness, "there are certain subjects which I think you know I never cared to discuss."

"I knew you were always very pharisaical," answers the young man, bitterly, "and never made allowances for any one."

"Perhaps, in that case," says Vanessa, piqued, "you had better drop the subject."

"No," cries Ravenhold, passionately, "I will not. I shall tell you the truth. Why do you always stir up my angry feelings and make me look an ill-tempered brute? Since almost the first day I ever knew you you have taken a delight in bringing out the worst part of me; only, I suppose, to show your power over me."

"I do not understand you, Lord Ravenhold," says Vanessa, rising and looking angry in her turn.

He takes her by both hands in spite of her resistance. There is a masterful, passionate look in his eyes, which half daunts, half pleases this capricious young lady.

"You *shall* understand me before I leave this spot," he says. And then the touch of her hands, which he still holds, softens and makes him humble.

"I love you with all my soul," he says, in a voice full of emotion. "If it was a crime to tell you so before, it is not one now. Oh, my love, I love you!"

Vanessa draws her hands away.

"You love me," she utters, scornfully. "Indeed, I feel much

flattered by coming after your other loves. *Such loves!*"—with bitter emphasis.

"You mean that miserable Indian affair," he cries. "I do not know what you have heard, and you will not believe the truth if I tell it you. I never, *never*"—vehemently—"cared one iota for that woman. It was only because I was in such despair about you that I allowed myself to be dragged into it. Of course your sex never will understand that sort of thing; that a man, out of sheer wretchedness about one woman, can try to get comfort, or at least forgetfulness, out of another."

"No," answers Vanessa, coldly, "I do not think a woman *can* understand that sort of thing. And you forget, Lord Ravenhold, that you are insulting me by professing to have had any such feeling for me whilst my dear, dear husband was alive."

Ravenhold turns away from her, and stands looking at the water and trees beyond, feeling perhaps more bitterly disappointed than he has ever done in his life.

"I suppose," he says, after a long pause, "that I must be a most egregious ass. You always hated me. I ought to have known it, if I had not willfully shut my eyes; and yet I have been building and building upon the thought of seeing you again, and—and what might come of it—and now—oh, my God! how shall I bear it?"

His breast is rent by a bitter groan; he hides his face with his arm. Vanessa sits staring at him, her heart beating, her red lips half parted. Yet she does not speak. Presently he turns, all his face distorted by pain.

"Good-bye!" he says, in a husky, indistinct voice.

And he holds out his hand, with one last look of agonizing appeal.

"Good-bye!" utters Vanessa, quite calmly.

And thus he goes.

CHAPTER XXVI.

BITTER indeed at heart is Ravenhold, as he walks across the greensward toward the house to take leave of Edith and to confess his defeat. He scarcely knew before how much he had built on the result of an interview with Vanessa; he had bided his time with, for him, superhuman patience, until a more than decent interval from her husband's death had elapsed, and until that other wretched affair had had time to blow over. How disproportionate are rewards to punishments in this world! he thinks, bitterly. There are some loves for which the world might be counted well lost; loves which have held so much of delight that come what will afterward, one may be reconciled to the cost of the joy by the memory of its rapture; but the affair which he can never stigmatize by other names than "wretched," "miserable;" into which he had simply allowed himself to drift from a sort of weary disappointment; what anguish and torment it had cost him! It had dragged his name through the dirt; it had exiled him for months from his own country; it had injured him in the eyes of the one woman with whom he was

madly anxious to stand well; it had forever, perhaps, killed his chances of happiness. For the only idea of happiness that presented itself to his mind was the possession of Vanessa. The "wretched affair" had cost him, besides, terrible heartburnings, for though he was indifferent, the other factor in it loved him madly, and had threatened to destroy herself if he refused to marry her, and he had halted some time between what is called "a sense of honor" and the spoiling of his life. It had cost him a great deal of money as well, but that was a very secondary consideration, although he was extravagant and not very rich—it had cost him the good opinion of a certain section of society which is extremely ready to lay down the law about what other people ought to do, and which chose to say he had behaved badly in not marrying the unfortunate woman. The same set, however, would have taken very good care to show the "unfortunate woman" that she was a pariah had she ventured anywhere near their charmed circle even as Lady Ravenhold.

Edith was sitting in the drawing-room pretending to read. She had given the pair an hour, perhaps two hours, to make up their differences, and had come to the conclusion that there could be no possible objection under the circumstances to asking Lord Ravenhold to stay and dine. Every now and then a great sigh heaved her breast; she felt envious, though by no means unkindly envious, of their happiness.

She was startled when Ravenhold walked in at the window alone, and with an expression on his face that made any question needless.

"I have got my *conge*," he says, "so I had better go at once. May I order my horse?"

Edith rings the bell, and until the servant has come and departed neither speaks. Then she says heartily:

"I am sorry."

"Thanks," answers the young man, his eyes softening. "You have been very good and kind. You have done all you could for me."

"Are you sure it is hopeless?" asks Edith, gently.

"Quite sure. I was a fool to imagine she had the slightest thought of me. She does not care two straws about me—that is perfectly certain now."

"Don't you think, perhaps, that time——"

He shakes his head impatiently.

"I believe she hates me," he says, for, to a lover, there is nothing between extremes.

"Oh, no, no, I am sure she does not. If I were you I would not despair."

Then Lord Ravenhold's horse is announced, and the two young people take leave very kindly of each other. Ravenhold walks his horse all the way down the drive, his feelings being rather of the nature of a dull despair than of the passionate disappointment which makes a man want to ride to the devil. When he is nearing the lodge gates he sees a tall, graceful figure in black ahead of him. His heart beats to suffocation as Vanessa turns and comes toward him. He pulls up, and is out of his saddle in

a second. There is a lovely blush on her face; her eyes look soft and melting.

"I am sorry that I was unkind to you," she murmurs.

All the blood rushes madly to the young fellow's head. If he had not his bridle in his hand, if there were not two children playing at the lodge gates in sight of them, *if*, oh, cursed word that prevents and limits every pleasure the world holds! how he would catch his darling to his heart! But stay, my lord, not too fast! As soon as Mrs. Brandon observes his excitement and the threatenings of his eyes, she retires swiftly into her shell again.

"Do not misunderstand me!" she exclaims, almost before he has time to speak. "I thought I had been unkind, and I wanted to say I was sorry—that is all."

He is not to be daunted so soon this time.

"That is *not* all!" he says, catching her hand with kindling eyes. "I swear it shall not be all!"

"Let go my hand!" says Vanessa, with a warning glance at the infant spectators.

"The children be—blessed!" cries his lordship, gayly. "Let me walk with you to the Vicarage—darling!"

If Vanessa thinks she never heard that charming word so tenderly or delightfully pronounced before, she does not permit her lover to read her thoughts.

"You must not say that, Lord Ravenhold," she utters, reprovingly. "And I am going back to Edith at once. She will be looking for me."

"You shall not go, I swear!" he cried passionately, "until you have given me some little gleam of hope."

"Hope of what?" she says, innocently, turning her wonderful eyes upon him.

Again the horse and the children interfere to protect Mrs. Brandon from Lord Ravenhold's inclination to demonstrativeness.

"You know quite well," he cries.

But Vanessa only says, irrelevantly:

"I *must* be going. Good-bye. Lord Ravenhold, you hurt me! Let me go, I desire!"

The last in quite a different tone.

"I will not!" he replies, very resolutely, the color and passion rising simultaneously in his face, "until you tell me when I may see you again. May I come to the Vicarage to-morrow—to-morrow morning?"

"But you have seen me to-day," she replies, perversely. "I dare say we shall meet in London in the autumn."

"By the autumn," he says, and finishes the sentence with his eyes, which, from the swift change of her color, it would seem Mrs. Brandon understands.

"Do not be silly," she murmurs. "And now, please let me go."

"Shall I come to-morrow?" he asks again.

"No—yes. If you like."

And, having regained undivided possession of her hand, she sets her face toward the Hall.

"Good-bye."

"Till to-morrow, my sweet love!" he utters, joyously.

He stands looking after her. Once she turns, smiles, and makes a graceful little gesture with her hand. Then he mounts his horse and rides away with heaven in his heart, whilst Vanessa walks with winged feet toward the garden. How glad she is she acted on that impulse! The moment he left her in the arbor she repented. She told herself that this time he had accepted his dismissal; that in all probability she would never see him again. She had thrown away the chance of immense happiness, had wantonly condemned herself to a lonely loveless life—had sent him away, doubtless, to Lady Mildred.

The last thought broke down her pride, and she went swiftly out of a side door in the garden toward the drive, where she must intercept him if she were in time. And if, instead of walking his horse moodily along, Lord Ravenhold had put him to a trot, most unquestionably Vanessa would have been too late, and, it is more than possible, would never have had another chance of making her *amende*. A minute sooner or later, a seemingly accidental meeting, some trifling incident, and the whole course of our lives is changed. Truly the dice of Fate are loaded with trifles.

When Vanessa leaves Lord Ravenhold, she betakes herself back to the gardens, and meets Edith, who is looking for her, quite innocently, and as though nothing had happened. Edith is highly displeased with her, and makes no secret of her indignation.

"Really, Vanessa, I have no patience with you. You are too provoking!"

"How?" asks Mrs. Brandon, demurely. "What have I done?"

"You have sent that poor boy away wretched. He came all the way from London to see you, and then you treat him in this shameful and cruel manner."

"It will do him good," observes Vanessa, unfeelingly. "I think it is quite wrong for every one to receive returned prodigals with open arms as though they were heroes."

"You have sent him away heart-broken!" exclaims Edith. "I dare say he will do something desperate."

"Oh, no, my love," returns Vanessa, lightly—"men don't do desperate things for love in these days. He will drink a glass or two more wine for dinner, smoke an extra dozen cigarettes, and will feel quite happy and comfortable afterward."

"I could never have believed you were so heartless," says Edith, more angry than ever. "And I think you owe him something when you were the cause of his getting into that wretched entanglement. He told me so."

"It is very easy for him to say so, isn't it?" says Vanessa. "On the principle that 'a bad excuse is better than none,' I suppose?"

Why Mrs. Brandon should behave with this duplicity I am un-

able to conjecture, but she is quite successful in misleading her friend.

"I have no patience with you!" cries Edith, angrily. "I don't understand you in the very least. You complain of being lonely and wretched, of your life being over, and here you get a chance of a happy and brilliant future, and you toss it away as if there were fifty better ones waiting for you. What on earth would you have? A man who adores you, who is as handsome and charming as a man can be, who has everything else to recommend him, and you treat him with as much contempt as if you were a grand duchess and he were——"

Here Edith pauses, unable to find a suitable simile.

"It will do him good," says Vanessa again, in the same heartless, flippant manner.

"It will most likely send him off to Lady Mildred," returns Edith. "There will be no question as to how she will receive him."

Vanessa smiles in a manner which provokes her friend inexpressibly. Edith's last remark has pleased her extremely, by convincing her how wise she has been in not letting Ravenhold go away in despair. She is so cheerful and bright in her manner all the evening that Edith is goaded into saying:

"After all, women are quite as heartless as men! Indeed, hardly think any man would gloat over the idea of having made a woman thoroughly wretched and unhappy."

"Is that meant for me?" asks Vanessa, smiling. "My dear child, I would stake everything I possess that at this moment Lord Ravenhold is not the least bit unhappy."

"I don't love you," says Edith, as she bids Mrs. Brandon good-night. "I am disappointed in you. No! I don't want to kiss you."

"Yes, you do," returns Vanessa, sweetly, embracing her. "It is you who are unreasonable, and I who am consistent. You know all that you have said about placing confidence in men, and yet the first one who comes, just because" (with feigned contempt) "he is handsome and has pretty manners, you range yourself on his side, and are ready to quarrel with me for not rushing into his arms."

"There is a difference between rushing into his arms and treating him in the shameful manner you did to-day," remarks Edith. "And I think they would be very nice arms to rush into."

"Do you?" says Vanessa, with a false and wicked little gesture of distaste.

"Good-bye," utters Edith, in a melancholy tone. "You do not deserve to be happy. And some day you will be very sorry for this."

"Shall I?" asks Vanessa, still in the same smiling, flighty mood which displeases her friend. "We shall see."

But when she is alone in her room at the Vicarage the smile leaves her mouth, and she looks intensely serious. Her heart beats fast; a sense of rapture at the thought of the future steals over her. but, mingling with it, is a feeling of remorse. Is this her

promised devotion to the memory of her dead husband? How dare she think of love, and passion, and a new life whilst he is lying cold and lonely in his narrow grave? But love of the living is a stronger motive power than fealty to the dead, and Vanessa's first thought on waking in the morning is one of delight that Ravenhold is coming to her to-day. She is unusually careful over her toilet. She fastens a blush-rose in her bosom; she puts on her smallest and newest shoes. She is almost shocked to catch herself humming a waltz tune whilst she dresses.

Somehow, this morning she finds it impossible to settle to anything. Her nerves are in a state of the highest irritability; she starts at every sound; she cannot work, or read, or play. She sits for ten minutes in the rose-bower, and returns to the house thinking she has been there at least an hour. She wanders up and down, rearranges every flower in the big china bowl, eyes herself in the old-fashioned mirror, glances out of the window, takes countless looks at the chiming clock. When at last she hears the loud summons of the bell, her heart beats to suffocation; the crimson blood rushes mantling to her cheeks. For all that, when Lord Ravenhold is ushered in by the shrewdly smiling Susan, who is perfectly satisfied with the way in which she has my-lorded the visitor to-day, he finds Mrs. Brandon calmly engaged upon a piece of needlework, as though she had been placidly sitting there for the last hour!

His face is flushed, eager, joyful; he scarcely waits for the door to close behind him when he utters a word of strong endearment, and possesses himself of both Vanessa's hands.

"No, no, Lord Ravenhold, indeed you must not!" utters that lady, trying, not very successfully, to look dignified and displeased.

He draws a low chair in front of her, for, to get near her, he must either kneel or sit, and wooing kneeling is quite an exploded fashion.

"Do not let us have any more misunderstandings!" he says, impetuously, devouring her with his eyes. "Now that we are young, that all is smooth before us, let us be happy."

His tone sinks to entreaty; he has taken one of her hands; his eyes speak volumes.

The words are infinitely pleasing to her, but with the intuitive conviction of those of her sex who know mankind that it is a fatal error to yield too easily to their blandishments, she tries to withdraw her hand, and says:

"I shall be very glad to be your friend. You must not expect anything more of me."

"Do you mean to say," he cries, raising his voice again, "that you do not, that you will not care for me?"

"I could not care for any one," she answers, turning her eyes away, but acutely conscious of the absurdity and hypocrisy of her words.

Apparently Ravenhold's keen eyes pierce through the pretended mask.

"Could you not?" he says, in an exultant, masterful voice.

"But I swear you shall!" And with that, he flings both arms round her, whether she will or not, and presses his eager lips to hers.

Perhaps she is stunned by his violence; perhaps she is of those to whom a bold wooer is not displeasing; perhaps she thinks that moments of rapture are not so common as to be allowed to go a-begging; at all events, for some ten seconds she makes no resistance, but yields herself to the inevitable.

But then, naturally and of course, she pretends to be offended, and insists upon tearing herself from the arms which seem as if they would never willingly release her again.

"Let me go, Lord Ravenhold. You hurt me! I am very angry. I do not like you."

He smiles; he does not care, he does not believe her; he is wildly triumphant, madly happy.

"Do not be angry," he says, caressingly. "Why should you? How can I help it? I only wonder how I kept my hands off you before."

"Do not talk like that!" she exclaims, puckering her pretty, smooth brow. "It is wrong and it is silly."

He is not to be abashed.

"Everything nice is wrong, most things at least, and if it is silly, I should like to go on being a fool forever."

Vanessa smiles, in spite of herself.

"You are just like a great spoilt child," she says.

With this he grows quite serious.

"Do not let us jest," he says, again taking her hand; "right or wrong, I have worshiped you ever since I first set eyes on you."

"No, you have not," interrupts Vanessa. "When you first knew me, you worshiped Lady Mildred."

"Lady Mildred!" he repeats, with impatient distaste.

"Yes, it is quite true. You know it," replies Vanessa. "And now she is free," adds the young lady, cruelly.

His eyes takes an expression of such deep reproach that she ought to feel penitent. But she does not.

"Do not let us waste time and words on her," he says. "If I cared for her once, *you* know well enough that it is long since over."

"You have cared for so many people since," remarks Vanessa, unkindly.

"Do you mean to twit me with that miserable affair in India?" cries Ravenhold, passionately. "For Heaven's sake let me tell you the whole story, and then——"

"No, no," interrupts Vanessa. "I do not want to hear it."

But he insists. It is not altogether an easy story to tell, because, although his object is to prove his own utter blamelessness to his mistress, the code of honor (poor enough, Heaven knows, though it is) of our day prevents a man shifting the fault so entirely and frankly on the woman as his first progenitor did.

When, however, a woman desires to condone and forgive, she is not prone to look very critically into the story it pleases her

lover to tell her. Vanessa, therefore, affects to accept and to be satisfied with his explanation. He clearly demonstrates that love, not forgetfulness of her, was the cause of this lapse in his morals, and that what he had sought as an anodyne had proved a bitter and nauseous drug. And although Vanessa positively forbids him to allude to his sentiments at a time when she considers them to have been dishonoring to her, he only replies sturdily:

"It is God's truth! I worshiped you then, right or wrong, as I do now. Who could be with you and not adore you?" And then Ravenhold comes to the point about which he is so eager. *When will she make him happy?*

But Vanessa is obstinately coy; she will not entertain the idea of marriage—no, not for ages, not for two years—certainly not for a year at the very earliest. It would be an indecency—it would be a slight to the memory of the man who had been so good to her; to whom she had been so devoted.

Vainly Ravenhold tries to shake her resolution by the tenderest, most urgent entreaties—she is inflexible. Then, suddenly, with a passionate gesture, he pushes back his chair, strides to the end of the room, and, returning, confronts her with a white face.

"It is the old story," he says, in a hard, rough voice. "From the first moment I knew you it has always been your pleasure to vex and thwart and try me. I tell you frankly, I cannot, I *will not* wait a year for you—I should be in my grave. So if you insist, I will go away and try to forget you. Oh, love!" he cries, his voice suddenly changing to extreme tenderness as he bends over her, "where is your heart? Why will you fling away happiness? Who knows what may happen in a year? Now we are both in the zenith of our youth and life, we have all the divine summer before us, and there is nothing but your perverse will to prevent our being the two happiest creatures on God's earth."

And Vanessa, seeing that he is so mightily in earnest, allows her scruples to be vanquished.

CHAPTER XXVII.

ONE cannot live in the world and remain unconscious that there is a vast amount of sorrow, suffering, misery, and disappointment in it; that great happiness is very rare, and lasting happiness impossible. But once now and again poor mortals are allowed a foretaste of what heaven *may* be, of what, could they but know certainly it *would* be, they would willingly undergo any pangs, privations, sufferings here to win.

To Ravenhold and Vanessa a season of perfect happiness was allowed—they were like Adam and Eve in paradise, for their seclusion was almost as great, and there was no serpent. Ravenhold did not grow angry or petulant or quarrelsome, and Vanessa was so supremely happy that, once and again, a vague terror crept over her that in this world such bliss must be balanced by some equal anguish. Her heart, in its full satisfaction, has for-

gotten its hunger—she would fain live on here for ever with her love. He, restless and manlike, happy though he is, would yet have the time speed on, whilst Vanessa would hang weights on the sweet minutes to make them lag. She knows full well that the golden hour for women is the hour of courtship.

Their love seems to defy satiety—they cannot have enough of each other—the long sunny days are all too short; the few night hours between parting and meeting all too long. They wander out in the moonlight, she bids him farewell a thousand times, and yet he returns for a last embrace—his enraptured eyes cannot gaze long enough, ardently enough upon her beauty. She is the very fairest woman upon earth to him, and, if her appreciation of his good looks is, in the nature of things, less keen, she finds him a most gracious and comely target for her lovely eyes.

Ravenhold has sent for his phaeton, and they take long drives together. One day he turns his horses' heads in the direction of the wood where the Hall party picnicked on the day when he fell into such dire disgrace by his unbecoming declaration. He tells his groom to put up for an hour, and he and Vanessa stroll away into the wood. She has a sort of intuition of his intention, but does not seek to oppose him; does not even affect to be aware of his design. He puts her hand through his arm and leads her straight to the rudely-cut bench beneath the beech-tree, and, when they reach it, he takes her suddenly in his arms and cries, in an exultant voice:

“Thank God!”

The eyes with which he looks at his love are full of fire and tenderness.

“And the last time I was here,” he says, “I was so miserable I could have hanged myself. Oh! if I could have dreamed that this joyful day would ever come! Then I thought the world a place too wretched to live in—I scarcely believed in God; but now,” fervently raising his eyes through the canopy of leaves to the blue heavens, “I thank Him every day and night of my life.”

A tender, happy little smile parts Vanessa's lips.

“And I too, love,” she whispers.

It is considerably more than an hour before they return to the phaeton. The horses are stamping and chafing, worried to death by flies, the pest which robs the country of half its pleasure.

The vicar, when he has time to tear his thoughts for an instant from his book, is pleased with the idea of his daughter's remarriage; as for Susan, she is as delighted as though she had found an eligible husband for herself.

“Now this,” she said confidentially to Mary Ann, “is just what should be. Though, poor, dear gentleman, a kinder and a better husband never lived than Mr. Brandon, and far be it from me to say a word to the contrary, but his lordship, now, he is just as if he was cut out for my dear young lady. Depend on it, Mary Ann, the Almighty ordained it from the fust.”

“Well, they make a beautiful couple as any one could see in a day's journey,” assents Mary Ann, cordially. “You can't

be more pleased than me, my dear. I wonder what the squire'll say?"

"What business has he thinkin' of young ladies at all?" cries Susan. "Better for him to be sayin' his prayers, and mindin' of his soul."

"Not much of that, I don't think," rejoins Mary Ann, shaking her head.

Ravenhold, on his part, is delighted with Susan, and pays her frequent visits in the kitchen or the "keeping-room." He generally sits on the table, with a cigarette in his mouth, having first asked her permission to smoke, and there he stays and talks by the half hour together. There is not much variety about his theme, but it is one that interests Susan as much as himself.

"Isn't she lovely, Susan?" he asks for the thousandth time, and Susan replies, with the modesty befitting ownership:

"I think so, my lord."

"She is the most beautiful woman in the whole world!" declares Ravenhold, with emphasis. "You never saw any one like her, Susan, did you?"

"That I never did, my lord," returns Susan, with equal decision. "But then, I've never been to London, nor seen many ladies at all."

"Well, I have," says Ravenhold; "and I give you my word of honor that *never* in Europe, Asia, Africa, or America, where the best-looking women generally grow, have I seen any one to touch her!"

"You don't say so, my lord!" exclaims Susan, with glistening eyes, as though this were the first time she had heard him make the startling assertion.

"The professional beauties are not a patch upon her," remarks Ravenhold, and then he sits placidly silent for a few moments, blowing rings of smoke through each other.

"Susan," he observes, presently, "you will have to come and stay with us, and see your young lady dressed to go to Court. You mark my words, she will be the loveliest woman there. Wouldn't you like to see the queen kiss her?"

"Lor', my lord!" cries Susan, getting quite red at the thought of such a stupendous honor. "Will her most gracious majesty really kiss Miss Nessa?"

"No," answers Ravenhold, smiling, and giving the old lady a friendly pat on the back. "She won't kiss Miss Nessa, but she will kiss Lady Ravenhold."

"I beg your lordship's pardon, I'm sure," says Susan, quite flustered.

"No occasion," laughs Ravenhold; then, thoughtfully, with a slight frown, "I wish she was Miss Nessa. It seems rather mean to be jealous of a poor chap who's dead; but you know, Susan, I hate to think of her having had a husband."

"But, my lord," rejoins Susan, anxious to console her favorite, as well as to take anything off her young lady that seems a blemish in his eyes, "perhaps if she hadn't have married poor Mr. Brandon, you would never have seen her."

"There's something in that," returns Ravenhold, more cheerfully.

Mrs. Fane wrote a charming and affectionate letter to Vanessa, expressing the greatest satisfaction with the marriage. And indeed she was not ill pleased; for, though she said to herself that her brother might well have looked for a more distinguished alliance, there was cause for devout thankfulness that he had not married that dreadful woman who had got him into such a wretched entanglement. And Vanessa's two thousand a year would be useful, as Gerard was not rich for his position. Lady Mildred was too old for him, and had a dreadful temper—they would have been sure to quarrel.

Edith Vaughan was rejoiced at the marriage, and tried hard, poor girl, to stifle the acute pangs of jealousy which would sometimes creep into her heart at the sight of so much bliss. Sir Bertram, who heard the news for the first time on his arrival at the Hall, very nearly had a fit of apoplexy on the spot, and went away again the next morning for fear of being compelled to witness the happiness of the lovers whom he had done his best to throw together, though in the hope of a very different result.

The marriage was fixed for the last week in July. In vain Vanessa had petitioned for delay; had urged the indelicacy, the heartlessness of marrying sixteen months after the death of her husband. Ravenhold was resolute; and she loved him so intensely that when, on one occasion of the date being discussed, he frowned and put himself into one of his petulant tempers, and swore she did not love him, she yielded, and his lordship was triumphant.

And so the day came; a glorious day, without one cloud in the heavens, a day that befitted the union of love and youth and beauty. Words are too poor to express great joys and overwhelming sorrows, so here will I lay down my pen, lest it be tempted to extravagance; to cross that slim boundary-line which divides the sublime from the ridiculous. Even the rejoicing young bridegroom, speeding along the country lanes with that lovely, beloved woman beside him, could find no words in which to tell her of the immense joy that filled his heart. How far he had once been from dreaming that she would ever be his; his own lawfully, without reproach before God and man!

It is the third week in August: Mrs. Fane is spending that month, as usual, at Orange Court, and Lord and Lady Ravenhold arrived last night to be her guests for the ten days which remain to her of chatelainship. On the last day of the month she will depart, and Mr. Giles Fane will resume his dominion. The magnificent reception-rooms, with their wealth of Louis Quatorze furniture and ornament, will be reshrouded in their holland coverings; the exquisite chandeliers transformed into inversed balloons; the carved frames of the mirror swathed and bandaged until Mrs. Fane or her mother-in-law again visits the Court. The gun-room, billiard-room, and two large rooms adjacent, which the owner uses as bedroom and sitting-room, and which are all on a level with the entrance-hall, are the only apartments which he ever enters when alone at the Court. Ne

do his hobnailed boots ascend the flight of marble steps that leads to the house proper. All the beautiful furniture and decorations are so much trash in his eyes; once or twice he has been half tempted in a drunken orgy to make a raid upon them with some choice spirits, leaving ruin and havoc behind him.

Orange Court is a very different place from that designed by its first proprietor. Then it was a solid brick mansion in Queen Anne style, named in compliment to that sovereign's brother-in-law. Giles Fane's father pulled down and rebuilt it in the Italian style, with terraces and balustrades, and flights of steps decorated with marble statues, fountains, and rows of myrtle and orange-trees in tubs. To this last feature it is popularly considered by the present generation to owe its name. It is a house, a palace rather, very charming and beautiful to eyes not so highly cultured as to be able to pronounce it meretricious and in bad taste. Too much knowledge on any particular subject is frequently a hinderance to enjoyment.

In deference to his mother's wish, Giles Fane has the beautiful gardens kept up, though he never goes into them himself, and looks upon them with as much contempt as on the fine furniture inside the house. The party is quite a small one; indeed, it consists only of the Ravenholds, Lady Cornelia Fane, Colonel Dallas, Mrs. Fane, and Mr. Anson.

The lovers, Hermione has decided, would be very much bored if they had to give up their love-making and do company manners, and she would not, she declared, make other people wretched at the sight of bliss they could not share, nor demoralize them into trying to be happy in a less legitimate manner.

"I dare say I shall die of envy myself," she adds; "but that cannot be helped."

It is a lovely Sunday afternoon—they have all been to church in the morning, and are now, after a big lunch, resting from their labors. The lovers have of course gone off together; Lady Cornelia is dozing over a book of sermons; the colonel is disconsolately pacing one of the avenues with a cigar for company; Hermione and Roland Anson are sitting together on a rustic bench at the end of a long green alley planted with a double border of yews. Presently they see Lord and Lady Ravenhold emerge from one of the side walks—his arm is round her waist, her face is upturned to his. Becoming aware of the occupants of the bench, they vanish as swiftly as they appeared.

Hermione darts a glance half comic, half petulant, at her companion.

"How sorry I am I asked them here!" she says. "The sight of so much happiness makes me positively ill. I shall have jaundice or bilious fever before they go. It seems to make me 'turn over like,' as my old nurse used to say."

"Console yourself," returns her companion—"it will not last."

Hermione gives a sigh that seems as though it would rend her lace boddy in twain.

"But only think how divinely happy they are now!" she says.

"Only think," he returns, "how unutterably wretched they will be when their illusions dispel and their raptures are over!"

"But they will have the delightful remembrance of what they once enjoyed."

"A sorrow's crown of sorrow is remembering happier things."

quotes Ronald Anson.

"I don't know," says Hermione. "I would rather be happy and remember it, than have no pleasant memories."

"So would not I," he answers. "I think it must be maddening to remember intense happiness, and to know that it will never come again."

Hermione looks away to the furthest point of the green alley.

"Oh!" she says, in a voice of intense longing, "only think of the utter bliss of loving and being passionately beloved, and of its being right! It is a horrid, humiliating thought that one is not loved; indeed, that one is disliked by one's own husband. Why," petulantly, "*why* should mine dislike me? And that woman! oh, heaven! did you see the wretch in church this morning?—to think he adores her and hates me!"

"My dear child," observes Mr. Anson, "you need hardly let that distress you. I suppose a pig would naturally prefer a cabbage to a bunch of lilies and roses."

"That is very nicely put," says Hermione, half smiling, "but it does not console me. Did you see her flaunting herself under my very nose, in her blue silk gown and her Paisley shawl, and that orange feather in her hat, and the great gold chain around her neck? And her troop of snub-nosed urchins! I suppose the congregation were all thinking how bad I must feel. It is not that I really care," cries Hermione, trying to strangle her emotion, "but, sometimes, a sort of fury comes over me and I feel capable of doing something desperate. I want to fling his money in his face and shake the dust of his hateful place from my feet, and cry, 'Go and be happy with your choice, and besot yourself with drink and turn the place into a tavern, and let me forget such a being exists on the face of the earth!' Roland!" turning suddenly upon him—"you have often pretended to be fond of me. I don't suppose you really are, or you would have asked me long ago to leave my wretched life and go away with you. Why do you not?"

"Why?" he says, looking at her with a tender, melancholy gaze, "because I love you better than I love myself."

"It is very easy to say that," she answers, half mockingly.

"Yes," he says, "easier than to prove it."

"Most men," she goes on (for it pleases her to try him)—"most men, seeing a woman they cared for utterly wretched, would say, 'Come to me, and let me try to make you happy.'"

"It would be only when I had said that, and you had consented, that you would know what it is to be *utterly* wretched."

"Because you would get tired of me and desert me."

"No; but because the love of one man cannot in a thousandth degree compensate a woman for the loss of the rest of the world and for her own self-respect."

"Then you think a woman, however wretched in her home, ought to stick to it, and that she has no business to want love, even though she is quite young and has strong affections?"

"Shall I tell you what I think?" he says, his voice kindling a little. "I think every human being, man or woman, who craves for love, should be allowed to enjoy it; if they have at first chosen an unworthy object, they ought to be able to choose again. I do not believe the Almighty, who has implanted in our hearts that great need of love, which is, being pure, the holiest feeling on earth, would ordain that any one should lead a loveless life because he or she has begun it with an error of judgment. That ordinance is man's; it is not God who punishes, but society. If society opened its arms to a woman who left her husband for another man, do you think she would feel remorse or degradation? Society punishes, and the punishment is so terrible that no woman can bear it, least of all a sensitive, pure-hearted woman as you are. That, child, is why I never proposed to make you happy by insuring your misery. Though," smiling sadly, "I think I know you too well to imagine that, had I prayed and importuned you ever since I knew you, you would have consented to my prayers."

Two tears steal down Hermione's cheeks, her mouth works with emotion. Then, rising abruptly, she says:

"Come, let us go and walk."

So they wander off silently together. Presently they come with some suddenness upon the lovers. Ravenhold's arm is, as usual, round his wife; with his hand he clasps both of hers; her head lies tranquilly on his shoulder. At sight of the other pair she makes a gesture as though to start away from him, but he holds her fast, and says, with laughing eyes and lips:

"No, no, my love, we are doing nothing wrong. How delightful," apostrophizing the new-comers, "to have done with guilty terrors, and not to be obliged to keep one eye and one ear always open for unexpected arrivals!"

But Vanessa, with the modesty becoming her sex, insists upon freeing herself from his embrace. Her lovely face is dyed with blushes as deep as though her action were not quite lawful and proper.

"Ah, my dears," says Hermione, with mock seriousness, "do not exhaust your bliss too soon. Think of all the long future, and economize."

"Our store is boundless," cries Ravenhold, joyously—"there is no end of it. We can eat our cake and keep it too—it will be like the widow's cruse."

"I hope it may," says Hermoine, a trifle maliciously.

"You are jealous, my dear," retorts her brother.

"I am," she returns, with emphasis. "Come," to her companion, "let us go and leave them. The sight of them gives me the spleen."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE year has waned—the happiest year of Vanessa's life—the new year is already in its second month. It has been, on the whole, a time of brilliant sunshine and summer skies (figuratively speaking, of course); but there have been some clouds. Vanessa's eyes have rained tears more than once; tears called forth by a sharp or petulant word from her lord, but he has always kissed them away again. She is his most humble slave; she adores him so intensely, so unwisely, that a cold or angry inflection in his voice has power to terrify and make her wretched—she thinks wonderingly, almost enviously, of the time when she could play off disdainful airs upon him, and provoke him by her malicious pretense of indifference. She is painfully conscious that the tables are turned now—that he holds the whip and reins, and that she is forced to go whither it is his will to drive her. Once, in December, when Hermione was on a visit to them, she thought fit to say to her lovely sister-in-law:

“My dear, you are making a rod for your own back.”

“How?” asks Vanessa, smiling.

“You let Gerard see that you are too fond of him.”

“But I am fond of him. He is my only thought in the world” (her eyes kindling). “I worship the ground he walks on.”

And she proclaims this with her head well thrown up and a proud air, as though she gloried in her chains.

“Beware, my dear!” smiles Hermione. “Men are human—very human—Gerard is particularly human.”

“What then?” asks Vanessa.

“Why, then,” returns Hermione, a trifle embarrassed, “it does not do to let them know their power, because—because they are sometimes apt to abuse it.”

“But if I am altogether devoted to him?”

“Be devoted, but do not show it more than you can help.”

This policy, however, does not lend itself to Lady Ravenhold's ideas.

The winter has been delightfully passed in entertaining and being entertained. Vanessa has been *feted* and flattered everywhere; with her beauty, rank, and charming, gracious manners, she has made a sort of royal progress. Ravenhold, being much influenced, as men frequently are, by seeing the impression his beautiful wife creates, values her all the more on this account, and excites much indignation and pretended ridicule in the breasts of other handsome women who would fain share his attentions by his show of exclusive devotion to Vanessa. She has, up to this moment, never experienced a single pang of jealousy.

It has been arranged that they shall spend the last fortnight of February in London, and they have made delightful plans for enjoying their visit thoroughly. Parties to the play, little dinners, all sorts of pleasant rendezvous. Most unfortunately, Va-

nessa caught cold on the journey up, and it has developed into an influenza of the severest kind. Stirring out of the hotel is not to be thought of, even if she did not feel, as she does, too ill to move; even if the weather were genial instead of raw and foggy.

Her husband's vexation is almost more trying to bear than her own sufferings; he seems more put out than sympathetic; it is as if she had caught cold to be perverse, instead of being bitterly disappointed as she is.

On the second day after their arrival, she is so much worse that she remains in bed until luncheon-time. Ravenhold has been out all the morning, and as soon as lunch is over he takes his hat preparatory to starting off again.

"Are you going out, darling?" says Vanessa, imploringly.

"Well, I was," he answers, hesitatingly.

"Do stop with me," she entreats. "I feel so ill and so wretched."

He puts his hat down with a little jerk, goes to the window and looks out.

"I wish to goodness we hadn't come up," he observes, discontentedly. "Beastly weather, and all one's plans knocked on the head by this infernal cold of yours!"

Perhaps he does not intend his tone to be reproachful, but it is.

"I thought it was very silly of you having that window down and sitting with your face to the engine."

"I wish you had told me so, darling," observes Vanessa, meekly.

"What's the use of telling a woman anything?" he returns, with latent irritability. "She's sure to do the very reverse."

Vanessa feels the tears rising, and concludes that she had better let the unwilling captive go.

"If you want to go, dear, I won't keep you," she says.

"Can I do anything for you if I do stay?" he asks, briskly; and as she cannot reply in his present mood, "Yes, you can come and sit by me and hold my hand, and comfort and console me," she replies, reluctantly——

"No, I don't think so."

He pounces joyfully on his hat; his manner becomes cheery again.

"Can I bring you in anything?" he asks, with his hand on the door—"any lozenges or anything?"

"No, thanks, dearest," she replies, and he goes briskly out with a smile and a nod.

Vanessa feels very desolate; she leans back in her chair, puts her feet on the fender, and shuts her eyes. After all, people who say the world is a miserable place are not so altogether wrong.

It is the longest, dreariest afternoon she has ever passed. Her head aches; a sense of oppression almost stifles her. She is too uncomfortable to doze. She looks constantly at the hideous and gigantic gilt clock on the chimney-piece. It seems hardly possible that the hand can take such an immense

time to travel one little minute. She gets up, and looks out of the window. The atmosphere is dull and yellowish, but, for all that, broughams, occasional victorias, swift hansom's are dashing about, and there seems a general stir and animation, as though no one minded much about the weather. And but for this wretched cold she too would be out, shopping, walking, driving, amusing herself somehow in company with her heart's beloved. She goes back to the fire, shuts her eyes, and begins to think.

It is quite a long time since she even remembered John Brandon. It seems almost as though she had been his wife in some former life: some previous and different state of existence altogether. But to-day time is effaced; the past is brought back. It might have been only last week that she was living in Bryanston Square, in the early months of their marriage. She remembers how, in her first winter in London, she had a severe, feverish cold as now, and all the circumstances recur vividly to her memory. Brandon used to come home earlier from business that he might sit with her, and cheer her up, and try to make her forget her discomfort. Lest she should be lonely, he dined up-stairs with her. He used to read to her, or sit holding her hand, and pillowing her head upon his breast. He used to wake in the night to give her her medicine; waiting on her, thinking of all her wants, seemed to be a pleasure rather than a trouble to him. He only left her because business obliged him, and then he came back as soon as possible.

The tears ooze through Vanessa's closed lids as she remembers how bored Ravenhold has seemed the last two or three days; how silent he has been; how he has appeared to consider her illness his grievance rather than hers. But oh! how long the time seems! how immensely she looks forward to his coming back! how she listens, holding her breath, to every footfall on the stairs, and feels a pang of disappointment each time it passes without stopping. It grows dark; the waiter comes in and lights up three great gas-burners, and brings her tasteless tea and abominably cut bread and butter, both of the worst possible quality, such as one gets in the best private hotels in London. The minutes crawl on, and Vanessa feels in turn hurt, irritable, wounded by her husband's neglect. But every other feeling is forgotten in joy when the door is dashed open, and her lord comes in, radiant, handsome, beaming.

"Well, my pet, how are you?" he cries, gayly, coming up and taking her hand, and she looks up at him with an adoring glance, which, this time last year, would have sent his brain reeling with joy, but which he scarcely remarks to-day.

"I have felt so ill, and the time has been so long, darling," she answers with a little pout, like a spoilt child who wants to be made a fuss with.

Ravenhold is too preoccupied to pay much attention to this. He has evidently something on his mind.

"By Jove! what a bore!" he says. Then he looks at the clock—it is half-past six.

"Should you mind very much, darling," he says, breaking

suddenly into his subject, "if I dined out and went to the play? I just met the Blanks, and they want me awfully to join the party. They were dreadfully sorry to hear about you—she sent her love, and will look you up to-morrow."

Vanessa feels as if her heart had suddenly frozen up—a sense of utter despair creeps over her—if Gerard had announced his intention of starting to-night for America she could not feel worse. After that awful afternoon, to think of spending six or seven more such dreadful, solitary hours! She burst into tears—tears that she is utterly powerless to restrain.

"Good God!" cries Ravenhold, impatiently. "What is there to cry about? There, there, for Heaven's sake, my dear child, leave off! I won't go. Though," pacing up and down with a hopeless air, "what in the name of Fortune I'm to do in this stifling room all the evening I don't know. 'Pon my soul, my luck is too infernal. As soon as you're well enough, we'll get back home. At all events there one won't be in the midst of pleasant things one can't enjoy."

Every separate word is like a stab to Vanessa. But he has no intention of wounding her—he is only expressing the natural irritation of a spoilt young man, accustomed to having his own way, when something contradicts him.

"Pray go," she says, coldly, trying by that means to conceal her desperate mortification. "Do not think of me!"

"Of course I shall not, if you put it like that," he remarks, sulkily.

"I would much prefer your going," says Vanessa, in the same cold voice.

"It is rather dog-in-the-manger-like," observes Ravenhold, "to stop my fun because you can't go yourself. And it's not as if I could do you any good by stopping. It's bad for you to talk, and you can have Dalton" (her maid) "to sit up with you if you are lonely. However, of course now I shall not go."

And he looks the picture of injury and disappointment. Vanessa has a sudden terrified intuition that if she thwarts him he will cease to love her. Anything, anything in the world rather than that.

"I wish you to go," she cries, brushing away her tears. "I do indeed; I was just a little disappointed at first, but really I do not mind. I could not help crying: it is only because I am not well; I shall be better soon, and then I can go with you." And she holds out her hand to him, and sheds a look of ineffable tenderness and forgiveness upon him out of her beautiful eyes.

Ravenhold takes her hand.

"If there was any reason in it," he says, allowing himself to be brought round, as he is desperately anxious to go; "if I could do anything for you, I would stop with the greatest pleasure in life. You know that, child!"

"Yes, yes, of course," she answers, trying to speak cheerfully, and to stifle the gnawings of her heart. "I shall not mind. I must make haste and get well."

"Do, darling," he returns, affectionately. "You know I would fifty times rather go with you than without you. In fact

it's not so much that I care to go as that they were so tremendously keen about it. But"—looking at the clock—"if I am going, I must look sharp, for we dine at seven fifteen."

With that he goes blithely out.

Vanessa sits staring at the fire, biting her lips, clenching her teeth, trying with all her might to keep back the tears that will force their way to her eyes.

In ten minutes Ravenhold dashes in again, looking handsomer than ever; all his face alight with pleasurable emotion.

"Good-bye, darling. Mind you eat a good dinner; and have some champagne. Best thing in the world for a cold. And go to bed *very* early!"

"You won't be late, *will* you?" says Vanessa, with a glance of entreaty.

"No—at least I don't think so. But on no account sit up for me. I shall sleep in the dressing-room, and I'll be very quiet, so as not to disturb you. Good-bye, my pet"—taking her hand. "I won't kiss you, for fear of catching your cold."

Then he goes off like a whirlwind, and Vanessa, is alone for an indefinite time that seems like eternity. No homeless outcast, no pariah feels more desolate and hopeless than she does at this moment. It seems to her as though her brief spell of joy is over, and she will never be happy again.

When you come to think of it, it is inconceivably ridiculous, not to say wicked, that a young woman, with everything in the world to make her fate seem enviable, should allow a trifling inconvenience to cause her so much anguish; but the pain we suffer is not always to be gauged by the apparent cause. She suffers acutely; her misery seems almost greater than she can bear. But for the fear of an incoming waiter, or the advent of her attentive maid, she would burst into a violent fit of weeping. How handsome he looked! For the first time she feels a pang of jealousy as she sees him, in imagination, talking in his charming, caressing manner to some other woman. That reminds her that she does not know of whom the party consists, except Colonel and Lady Ida Blank. She is not afraid of Lady Ida, but no doubt there will be other women of the party.

The waiter lays the cloth, and Vanessa goes through the miserable and most melancholy farce of dinner. Does a man ever feel half as wretched over a solitary meal as a woman, I wonder? But no—for he can take an interest in his dinner; and I hardly fancy that a woman, be she even something of a *gourmet*, can enjoy eating alone.

Vanessa's dinner is one of those tasteless and unappetizing meals which seem to be *de rigueur* in English private hotels. There is the half-warm, clear soup in the massive plated tureen, followed by a sole, fried in fine gravel, and served with tallow-colored melted butter—a sweetbread which defies the efforts of the spoon, surrounded by red lead, playfully called tomato sauce. A chicken decorated with pale, half-cooked sausages, accompanied by a cauliflower or greens which make the room almost uninhabitable for the rest of the evening, and a sweet omelet. In vain the solemn and obsequious raven hands all

these tempting dishes to her ladyship—her dinner consists of two spoonfuls of soup, and two inches in length, not thickness, of chicken. And when this banquet is over, she betakes herself again to the arm-chair by the fire. Her head aches worse than ever—the atmosphere is stifling—she longs to throw open the window and put her head out into the night air; but she is chilly as well as feverish, and does not attempt the dangerous experiment. She, however, bids the waiter turn out all the gas, for then, she thinks, she can cry unperceived. And cry she must. When he is gone and she is alone in the firelight, she weeps and sobs and sighs as if her heart would break. Foolish Vanessa, to make all this woe for herself! What is to become of her future? what will she do when a real grief attacks her?

She meant to sit up for her husband in spite of his injunction to the contrary, but when ten o'clock comes she is so utterly worn out that she finds it impossible to endure this wretchedness longer and elects to exchange it for another kind.

"Dear me, my lady, your cold is bad!" says Dalton, sympathetically; "your eyes are as red as fire."

And though she says this quite innocently, she is perfectly well aware that the appearance of her ladyship's eyes is not to be accounted for by her influenza.

Vanessa dawdles over her night toilet, anxiously hoping that her lord might come in before it is completed, but such is not the case. She dismisses her maid, and sits crouching over the fire for three quarters of an hour, which seem like as many hours. It is now twenty minutes to twelve. Her head and limbs ache so intolerably that she decides to betake herself to bed. When she thinks she has been there at least an hour, the clock in the next room strikes twelve. It is followed by two church clocks in the neighborhood. Suddenly a wild terror takes possession of Vanessa. Suppose something should have happened to her idol? Suppose he should have been knocked down by a cab, or the horse of his hansom has bolted, and he is at this moment lying maimed, insensible, perhaps dead, in some hospital? This thought drives her into a frenzy. But perhaps, after all, he has come in—quietly, as he said, so as not to disturb her, and is already safe in bed. She jumps up, opens the dressing-room door, and calls, softly:

"Gerard!"

No answer. Again, louder; no answer. She lights a candle and goes in; the room is empty; it is as cold as a well besides. She shivers and goes back to her own fire, which she piles up with coals. She throws a wrapper round her and resumes possession of the chair by the fire—she will not get into bed again. She leaves the door ajar—the cold comes in and sets her coughing violently.

Half past twelve. She cannot bear it any longer; she paces the room up and down—she goes into the sitting-room and looks out of the window. Every now and then a hansom dashes by—one or two stop—she listens with straining ears for Gerard's step; it does not come.

A quarter to one. She has an agonized certainty now that

something has happened to him—he would not be so cruel as to stay out like this merely for his own amusement's sake whilst she was suffering this intolerable agony of suspense. If she were only in her own house, she would call up the servants and send them in all directions to search for her missing lord, but here she would probably be thought mad.

Five minutes past one, and then his lordship comes creeping stealthily into his dressing-room, and looks anything but pleased to find his wife standing in the cold with wild, terrified eyes, looking like a ghost.

CHAPTER XXIX.

“WHAT on earth have you been sitting up for?” he says, almost irritably. “Do you want to catch your death of cold?”

Vanessa interrupts him by bursting into a hysterical fit of weeping. He goes and leans against the chimney-piece, looking bored to death. His wife's tears do not touch him; he does not feel sorry for her, but, on the contrary, indignant at her unreasonableness. This is the first time he has felt the gall of the marriage-chain, and he dislikes the sensation amazingly. He has had a cheery evening, and now to come back to tears and reproaches, when he wants to go to bed and to sleep, is extremely annoying. There is a little guilt on his conscience, too, and he had been particularly anxious to retire without having to interview his wife, or retail the events of the evening.

As for Vanessa, her fears being assuaged, she feels the not unnatural reaction of anger at having suffered needless tortures. When she can speak after her fit of sobbing, she says:

“How cruel of you to frighten me so! I thought you were killed.”

“Good heavens!” cried her husband, his handsome young face clouding with anger and impatience. “Am I to be treated like a child of ten? Perhaps you would like to send a servant to fetch me the next time.”

“There shall not be any next time,” cries Vanessa. “I will go with you, if I die after it, but I won't be left alone.”

Ravenhold looks anything but enchanted at this announcement—the same moment, however, Vanessa is seized with a violent paroxysm of coughing, which diverts the current of his thoughts.

“My dear child,” he cries, “don't cough like that! You'll break a blood-vessel. Haven't you got any cough mixture, or lozenges, or anything?” and he proceeds to hunt about for remedies.

Finding nothing else, he brings her a glass of water, and presently her cough subsides, and she lies back exhausted in her chair, literally worn out, quite beyond reproaches.

“Now, darling, do get into bed,” urges her lord, and she allows herself to be persuaded. Then he bids her go to sleep at once.

“Don't leave me!” she murmurs, in an imploring whisper.

“But, my good child, this room is like a furnace! I should

die of suffocation. I could not sleep one wink for that cough of yours, and I am as tired as a dog."

"Very well," she answers, coldly. "Good-night."

And when he is gone, her tears flow again, and she remembers that Brandon never found the room too hot or complained of being kept awake by her cough.

In the morning she is, naturally, very much worse; indeed, the doctor positively forbids her to rise. Ravenhold comes and sits on the edge of her bed for ten minutes and inquires affectionately about her health and feelings generally; then he remembers a most important engagement which cannot be put off but will only detain him half an hour. He is unavoidably kept, however, four times that period, and then he looks in to say that, as he will not be up to luncheon, and the hotel food is so beastly, he will lunch at his club and come back directly after. But again something detains him.

Vanessa is so weary of the dismal bedroom that, doctor or no doctor, she resolves to be dressed. Her husband shall not have the excuse of her being in bed to dine out to-night. Dalton dresses her in a lovely tea-gown and plaits her hair *a la Marguerite*; she cannot bear the fatigue of having it dressed. A less uncomfortable sofa has been brought from another apartment, and her lovely ladyship is laid upon it! Her truant lord comes in just in time to carry her in. She is not one of your little dolls of women that a man can run about with in his arms, but a stately, tall, and exquisitely developed woman; but Ravenhold is very strong and accomplishes the feat without any sign of distress.

She thanks him with a smile, and says languidly that she is afraid she is terribly heavy. He replies with something of the old manner that he would not have her a feather-weight lighter, and that little speech, tenderly uttered, condones his previous neglect.

Important business soon carries him off again, but he has promised to dine and stay with her all the evening. She has not asked him a word yet about his doings last night; she feels a little aggrieved against the Blanks for having invited him when she was ill, and they ought to have known she wanted him. People seem to think it a charity to take a man away from a sick wife, and perhaps it is—to him—but what about her?

Still, when at half past five, Lady Ida Blank's card is brought up with a message inquiring if she may be admitted, Vanessa replies, rather gladly, in the affirmative.

"My poor, dear child, this is too dreadful!" cries Lady Ida, coming in. "How on earth did you manage to catch such a terrible cold? But you look charming all the same, only just a little bit languid; and what a lovely frock! I hardly expected to be admitted, for Mildred Belair told me you were frightfully ill and in bed."

Mildred Belair! At that detested name Vanessa's heart stands absolutely still for a moment. Then a flame flies to her white cheeks; she brings on a fit of coughing to hide it.

"What a cough! My dear child, you must take care of your-

self. who is your doctor? I wish you'd have ——!" cries Lady Ida, all in a breath.

"I shall be all right directly," answers Vanessa from behind her handkerchief. "So Lady Mildred told you about me. When did you see her?"

"I have just come from there. Your husband had been lunching with her, and gave a shocking account of you. You know we were all at the play together last night. We had a delightful evening, and such a capital supper afterward! The only drawback was your not being there."

Vanessa is obliged to talk very fast to conceal the pain and anger that are devouring her. A madness of jealousy is strangling her heart. That he should have concealed his meeting with Lady Mildred from her gives the most horrible point to her suspicions. She is intensely thankful when Lady Ida departs, but, left alone, her jealous anguish increases tenfold. She dreads Lady Mildred unutterably, knowing the influence she once had over Ravenhold. And, this time yesterday, no faintest doubt of him had entered her brain. She had fancied herself unhappy then because she was ill and alone, but what was that to the terrible reality?

Ravenhold comes in presently in the most amiable and affectionate mood, but she only sees in this behavior the evidence of a conscience trying to conceal its guilt.

"What is the matter?" he asks after a moment: for she does not look at him, and only responds icily to his affectionate questions.

"Where did you lunch to-day?" she asks suddenly, fixing her eyes on him.

Then he knows that the sword of Damocles has fallen. He had really no motive for concealing anything about Lady Mildred, except the wish to spare his wife and himself unpleasantness; having an excellent intuition from his experience of the fair sex that "there would be a row if she knew it." He has no love for Lady Mildred, because all his passion is still concentrated upon his beautiful wife, but he was delighted to see her again as an old friend, and, considering the circumstances, she had behaved awfully well and kindly, and had not seemed to bear him the least malice, as, indeed, she very well might. It was to reward her for this that he had consented to lunch with her when she pressed him. She had given him a capital lunch—no one understood these things better—and she was the very best company in the world. And not one single allusion to the past in any way calculated to make him uncomfortable. Only, as he was bidding her "good-bye," she said, smiling, though with tears in her eyes, but not in a manner calling for any reply on his part:

"Come and see me sometimes. I should not like you to give me up. I shall always care more for you than for any one else."

And he had clasped her hand with a great fervor of friendliness, exclaiming:

"I shall never give you up! You may be quite sure of that!"

But he was so far from feeling anything more than friendship for her that he had no guilty sensations on that score, but was only disconcerted because he had done something which he knew his wife would not like. Women never will understand that a man can have any feeling but one for a woman in whose society he seems to find pleasure. Therefore when Vanessa attacks him, he looks slightly confused, and says, after a moment's pause:

"I suppose you know, or you would not ask."

"Yes," she cries, the hot blood rushing to her cheeks and her eyes flashing with passion. "Yes, I know that you met her last night and made the appointment for to-day, and then pretended to me that you were going to your club to lunch."

"I made no appointment," returns Ravenhold. "I said I would go if I could, and you did not want me. And I did not mention it to you, because I knew if I did there would be a scene, and, as you are so unwell, that would be bad for you."

"How thoughtful of you!" cries Vanessa, scornfully. "And pray why should there have been a scene?"

"Because," retorts Ravenhold, "you women are so infernally suspicious. Though Milly is one of my oldest friends——"

"Friends!" echoes Vanessa, with great meaning. "Something more than that, surely."

"I never said so," he replies, coloring. "You have no right to say that."

"Have I not?" she returns, with even more significance. "It would be strange if I were ignorant of what every one else knows perfectly."

With a sudden change of mood, Ravenhold sits down beside her and puts his arms round her.

"Don't be foolish, darling," he says. "Have you not proof enough that I love you? If I had cared for her, should I not have gone straight to her and asked her to marry me when she, like you, was free? You know that I have always been devoted to you—you have every atom of my love; why should you want to make us both wretched by pretending to doubt it?"

And with that, regardless of the risk of catching her cold, he kisses her fifty times.

So there is a renewing of love between them which runs very near being disturbed again when Vanessa, on the strength of his tenderness, begs him to give up Lady Mildred, and never to see her again. He will not give any such promise—nay, more, he insists that Vanessa shall receive and be civil to her hated rival; and Vanessa, terrified lest there should be another quarrel between them after their late reconciliation, and perhaps satisfied with the genuineness of her lord's passion for her, consents to be civil to her ladyship, should they meet. And meet they do the next day, when Lady Mildred comes to inquire after the invalid. Curiously enough, Ravenhold makes his appearance three minutes later. Nothing can be sweeter or more charming than Lady Mildred's manner to Lady Ravenhold—one might imagine her to be a bosom friend seriously unhappy at Vanessa's

indisposition. That lady, on the contrary, finds it literally impossible to be genial or friendly—her manner is very stiff, and utterly wanting in cordiality, although she is painfully conscious that she is behaving without tact and appearing to considerable disadvantage.

Lady Mildred treats Ravenhold in a friendly, almost affectionate manner, as though he were a dear brother; calls him Gerard, and succeeds (as she wishes to do) in driving Vanessa nearly mad with anger and jealousy. Ravenhold is obliged to be doubly cordial to the guest in order to atone for his wife's coldness. Vanessa, to her infinite chagrin, is forced to accept an invitation to dine with Lady Mildred as soon as her cold shall be better; if she refuses, she reads in her husband's eyes and voice that he will go without her.

Lady Mildred departs with a smile on her lips and hatred in her heart, compelled, with bitter reluctance, to own Vanessa's beauty.

"Never mind," she says to herself, pressing her feet hard against the carriage-floor, "he will get tired of her in time. *Le temps fait passer l'amour*. A woman's beauty does not prevent a man's satiety—thank Heaven!"

And with this pious thanksgiving she comforts her heart, and goes home to receive a lover for whom she had fancied until quite lately she felt a certain amount of tenderness.

In a few days Vanessa is able to throw off her cold; to go about with her husband, and to enjoy London. There is, however, the bitter drop in the cup which is seldom absent for the sweet draught of pleasure. Lady Mildred represents that drop. She is not to be daunted by Lady Ravenhold's coldness—indeed, it seems as if she does not or will not see it. Her dinner-party, of which she made such a point, comes off, and is graced by the presence of the bride and bridegroom. Cheery as the party seems, radiant and beautiful as the ladies look, there is a jealous fire burning in the breasts of two of them.

During dinner, Lady Mildred, whose best point is undoubtedly her fine, dark eyes, speaks very plainly with them to her whilom lover, and he has a relapse of the old caressing manner which he once used invariably to women he liked, but of which latterly his wife has had almost a complete monopoly. Vanessa smiles, but her heart is torn with fear and misery. Lady Mildred's turn is to come. After dinner Ravenhold joins his lovely wife, who is holding a little court of men; and looks and speaks caressingly to her with all the love and pride of possession, and Lady Mildred notes it, and her heart is devoured by a rage of envy and bitterness. The two women suffer almost equally; but Ravenhold is radiant, charmed with both, and apparently ignorant of the painful feelings he has excited. Vanessa might have sulked with him when they got into the brougham to drive home, only that he flung his arms around her, and told her with such unmistakable sincerity that she was without doubt the loveliest woman in the world, and had never looked so well in her life, that she stifled down the qualms of jealousy and allowed herself to be happy for the time.

But that terrible dread of Lady Mildred remained, and it was as if a great load fell from her heart when she found herself in the railway-carriage with her idol *en route* for Dallas Park;

CHAPTER XXX.

THE life that Vanessa leads now is a complete change from that which she led up to the time of her engagement to Lord Ravenhold. That, with the exception of the few months of Brandon's courtship and the early days of their marriage, had been one of comparative tranquillity and monotony—now it is composed of intense happiness, varied by sharp pangs. It is the life of every sensitive woman who hangs upon a man's love. In former days her temper had been equable—now it seems to her that her very nature is changed. Tempests of passion, agonies of fear and misery, sweep over her heart—she is either in a seventh heaven or crushed by despair, according to the mood in which her lord, her master, happens to be. If he is affectionate and tender, if he flatters and caresses her, she is unspeakably happy; if he is irritable and petulant, or seems bored, she is wretched beyond words.

Until lately, she scarcely knew that she had a temper—the language of reproach was almost unknown to her—now she feels at times as angry and bitter toward him as at others she is passionately loving; it is as though she must be always in extremes, and extremes are very exhausting to the nervous system, and are apt to undermine both health and temper. It seems a cruel enigma to her, as it has done to most of her sex before her, that whereas her love and her desire to lavish it increase month by month, his suffers a slow process of decay and falling off. She cannot assert that he no longer loves her, but oh! how changed, how different he is from last year! Then she was empress and he her slave—now the positions are reversed.

Hardly a day passes that she does not feel wounded by something he says or does, and he, having once begun the bad habit engendered by familiarity of speaking sharply to her when he is ill pleased or out of temper, is not likely to lay it aside again easily. For all that, he is very much in love with her still, and, if she could only have the wisdom to refrain from falling down and worshipping him, his passion might be warranted to last for a long time yet. It is all very well for men to be natural, to show their passion or their *ennui* with that delightful ingenuousness which is their chief characteristic (or rather the chief characteristic of their selfishness), but a woman must dissemble if she wants to be moderately happy. When she feels ardent, she must seem coy; when she is indifferent, she must pretend to be affectionate; if she wants to keep the reins, her head must be clear and cool. All said and done about a woman's rights and wrongs, man is master and she his inferior; it is only by courtesy that she is allowed to pretend to drive sometimes.

In spite of all that Vanessa suffers, she would not for anything that could be offered her exchange her lot with any other human being. To lose Ravenhold would be to lose everything the

woman holds of joy or delight. But her love gives new terrors to her life. When he is out hunting or shooting, she is subject to panics about his safety; if he comes in later than she expects him, she knows pangs that women with phlegmatic temperaments, or women whose being is not wrapped up in their lords, never dream of, mercifully for themselves. Paradise is to her the place where her love is—Hades where he is not. Poor Vanessa! Heaven pity any woman who loves thus! If she knows greater joys than most of her sex, she is doomed to a far greater excess of suffering, since pain preponderates so immeasurably in this world of tears.

Just before Easter they go to Paris for a fortnight. It is an admitted fact that nothing is more trying to conjugal harmony than travel, especially foreign travel. Ravenhold is of an impatient, petulant, imperious disposition, and particularly dislikes trouble and opposition. He gets put out very often, and vents it, in the manner considered legitimate by husbands, on his wife. Vanessa has a fine spirit, one that is remarkably quick to resent injustice; so there are, in consequence, words between them now and then. Unfortunately for her, she cannot sulk—he can.

Once, when he says that travel is extremely pleasant for a bachelor, but an infernal nuisance with a wife and her maid, she cries half the night. Her greatest misfortune is that the least word of her beloved can afflict her beyond measure. The thought that he does not regard her as an unmixed blessing fills her with unbearable pain. Still they spend a great many pleasant and happy hours in Paris. He is always proud of her beauty and likes to be seen with her. He is not one of those men who resent others admiring and coveting his possessions; on the contrary, it is agreeable to his vanity. He might indeed be furiously jealous, if he thought he had cause, but he knows too well that he has not.

Mrs. Fane joins them presently, and her brother takes the opportunity to go about a good deal alone, and Vanessa, fond as she is of her sister-in-law, is not pleased with the change of companionship. One morning at breakfast she urges Ravenhold to accompany them on some expedition which they contemplate, but he laughingly declines. Two is a very good number, he says: three would spoil it. And, besides, it would not amuse him. Again she presses him, but he declines; and when, even then, she will not accept his denial, he answers her with some sharpness. The tears come into her eyes; she cannot restrain them, and leaves the room abruptly.

"Gerard," says Hermione, "I think you are rather foolish."

"Do you?" he answers, almost indifferently. "Why?"

"You have a lovely and devoted wife, and you do not make as much of her as you ought."

"My dear girl," replies Ravenhold, "one cannot always be tied to a woman's petticoats. Vanessa is unreasonable."

"There was a time," observes Hermione, significantly, "when you asked nothing better than always to be tied to her petticoats."

"Oh, that was different," he says, lightly.

"Yes," she returns, dryly, "I am afraid it was. But don't forget, my dear, that she is exceedingly lovely, and that, if you get tired of her, there will be lots of men ready to adore her."

"I am not tired of her—not the least bit tired of her!" he cries, flushing a little. "Besides"—more quietly—"there is no fear of her looking at any one else."

"Not just yet, perhaps," answers his sister. "But very often, when a woman is disappointed, she allows herself to go on being miserable for a time—and then——"

"Well, and then?"

"She ends by consoling herself," returns Hermione, quite seriously.

Ravenhold laughs gayly.

"No fear, my dear."

But, five minutes later, he goes to look for his wife, and kisses her, and says he will drive with them in the afternoon.

Hermione thinks fit to give Vanessa also a little lecture when they are alone.

"You must not be too exacting with Gerard, my love," she says, assuming a playful manner. "He was always a shockingly spoilt boy, and we had to give in to him and let him do as he liked. And then, you know, men are not like us. They leave off when we begin. I don't know how it is, but the best man in the world cannot stand too much worship. He takes to giving himself airs. In fact, he does after marriage just what we do before it. If you could only, my love, *pretend* not to think quite so much of him; not to want to have him always with you!"

"I dare say it would be wiser," sighs Vanessa, "but how can one? And why should a man change? He was like me once—worse, I think. He could not bear to be away from me for five minutes—he said he could never know a happy moment until we were married and he was *quite sure* of me."

"Yes," says Hermione, pursing up her lips, "men do say those things, I believe. Not that I speak from personal experience. But, my dear, for goodness' sake, if you want to be happy, act a little part. Smile when he goes away, and smile when he comes back, and, above all things, never reproach him. Men can't stand being found fault with—they never think they are in the wrong."

Hermione's well-meant little lectures are not without their effect; it lasts quite forty-eight hours, during which time she feels several sharp pangs of envy at the happiness of which she is witness.

Ravenhold takes a house in Mayfair for three months from Easter. He and Vanessa have made many delightful projects for spending their first season together there. Both are fond of London. Now it would seem that all Vanessa's most ardent aspirations are to be gratified. Her position in society is no longer doubtful—she is one of the great ladies; she has a handsome young husband whom she adores, and who adores her—she knows, or will know, every one worth knowing. It will be hers no longer to look enviously at women going to Court in their

plumes and jewels; nor to watch from afar the groups of gay and handsome young people in the park among whom there used to seem such a delightful freemasonry—their honors and joys will be hers.

And yet—and yet—with strange perversity, Vanessa has said to herself with a sigh more than once, “Oh, if instead of the life that is before me, I could be down at home” (her own home), “with only Gerard—Gerard as he was last summer!” It is possible that the misgivings which haunt her now would not have entered her head, had not Lady Mildred become mixed up with their lives. She was in the same set—they met at every turn and corner; she *would* be on terms of intimacy with them—no coldness on Lady Ravenhold’s part seemed to affect or disturb her. And then Gerard was always there to make up for any lack of friendliness on his wife’s part. He seemed to cling particularly to this friendship: it was an utterly, entirely different feeling from that he had once entertained for her—it was the friendliness that one has for a thoroughly congenial acquaintance of long standing—for a person to whom one can talk without reserve; who claims nothing of one and yet seems always happy to be in one’s society.

Never was any woman more altered, more improved than Milly, Ravenhold thinks. She who used to be so exacting, so easily offended, who had such a tremendous temper! Now she is always the same, always cheery, smiling, sympathetic, whatever he wishes her to be; and, with all that, he knows, and is pleased to know, that she cares for him as much as ever and in the same way, although his passion has subsided into a purely platonic feeling. And he can say things to her that he cannot say to any one else. The most dangerous woman to other women is generally the one to whom a man can confide in this unreserved manner, unless she exercises her power benevolently.

Ravenhold is devoted to dancing; Lady Mildred is a perfect dancer; they nearly always meet at the same houses. He likes his wife to dance and be surrounded by men; no jealous spasm ever crosses his heart when he sees another man’s arm round her waist. But to her it is purgatory to see a woman in his arms, to see him sitting out in dimly-lighted conservatories with one, bending toward her and looking those unutterable things which, after all, mean nothing and are only a trick of manner. How gladly would she compound with him never to dance again if he would also forego dancing. She half broaches the proposition to him once, and he laughs it to scorn. There is only one woman, however, of whom she is earnestly, terribly afraid, and that is Lady Mildred. Once in a paroxysm of jealousy, she told Ravenhold that he must give *that woman* up, that he must choose between them, and his answer was this:

“Don’t be a fool! I have told you fifty times that, if there ever was anything between us (I don’t say there was) it is all over long ago. Now we are friends simply, nothing more. I most certainly shall not give her up for a ridiculous caprice on your part. If you don’t want to quarrel seriously with me, you

will say no more about it. But, whatever *you* do, I shall not give her up."

"Then I shall cut her," says Vanessa, passionately.

"You may do as you please. I don't care a d——" he answers, wrathfully. "If you do, I shall pay her all the more attention, and go to see her twice as often."

"Then I shall leave you," cries Vanessa, worked up to frenzy.

"All right," he replies, coolly, knowing how little fear there is of her taking such a step.

This quarrel, like its predecessors, is made up, but Ravenhold does not diminish his attentions to Lady Mildred, although if possible he keeps his visits, which are tolerably frequent, from Vanessa. He would not admit for an instant that the two women were rivals. What he calls his "love" is for Vanessa. Lady Mildred has his friendship.

For the first few months of their marriage Ravenhold and Vanessa, if circumstances compelled them to be apart for a few hours, gave each other, as is the wont of lovers, a minute account of how the time had been spent; but for some two or three months now his lordship had shown himself very ill disposed to be put through a catechism about his movements. He had occasionally replied with considerable petulance to his wife's cross-questioning, and had retorted that he made no inquiry how she amused herself, and that he wished to have equal freedom. This of course inspired in Vanessa's jealous heart the idea that his leisure hours were spent in a manner of which he knew she would not approve.

As a matter of fact, Ravenhold went pretty often to Lady Mildred's house. There he enjoyed a sense of perfect freedom: a thorough immunity from reproach and fault-finding—everything he said and did was right. He did not exactly complain of his wife; but, now and then, he would let fall an innuendo that his life was not altogether a bed of roses, and then a thrill of joy would flit through his listener's heart. She would begin by pretending to make excuses for Lady Ravenhold—would say that no doubt her jealousy arose from love; but then she would hasten to append a rider.

"It seems to me," she said, with a little sigh, "that if one loved a man perfectly, the first thing one would care for would be his happiness, and one would not allow one's self to worry him or make scenes to vex him. A woman ought to understand that a man cannot always be with her—he must have his hours of liberty."

"Of course," echoes Ravenhold, eagerly. "People must go their own way sometimes. When do I ever interfere with her or insist on having an account of where she has been and what she has done? I am not jealous if fifty fellows make love to her."

"I must say," observes Lady Mildred, softly, "that you are a wonderful husband—a far better one than I ever thought you would make."

"Ah, you didn't understand me, then," he says, pensively.

"No," she answers, with the ingenuous air of one who frankly confesses an error, "I don't think I did. But," sighing, "I do now."

He takes her hand and kisses it. The gesture does not proceed so much from love for her as from the warm and soothing sentiment of flattered self-esteem. He likes to be told he is in the right—he believes it implicitly—he does not think there is such another husband in London, and it is rather hard that he should not be properly appreciated in the right quarter.

Hermione talks to him in a very different strain. She always speaks of Vanessa's beauty and devotion, and begs him not to undervalue them. In consequence he goes much less frequently to his sister's house than to Lady Mildred's, and when he does says very little about his domestic affairs.

Colonel Dallas is a great deal with his beautiful new niece. He is almost as much her companion now as in the days when she was Mrs. Brandon and he had constituted himself her escort.

Ravenhold generally rode in the morning—Vanessa preferred to walk. She liked to ride in the country, but the heat and glare and confusion of the Row were disagreeable to her. Still, if she could have had her husband with her, she would have endured these willingly enough, but other riders were sure to join them and deprive her of his companionship. So she elected to walk or sit with the colonel. The lovely Lady Ravenhold was immensely admired—she would have been the fashion had she chosen. But if in Brandon's day she had refused even to make believe to flirt, was it likely, now her whole heart was absorbed by her husband, that she would have a word or a look for other men more than courtesy demanded? And men get tired of trying to flirt with a woman from whom they never get so much as a glance of encouragement. They all said she was beautiful, but they could not possibly indulge in any great enthusiasm about a woman who had not a thought for any man save her husband. Still, for their own vanity's sake, they liked to be seen talking to the most beautiful woman in London, and Vanessa never ran the risk of seeming neglected when she appeared in public.

She, if she suffered from jealousy or disappointment, did not breathe one word of complaint, and the colonel was far too much a man of the world to seem to notice anything that she did not wish remarked. But he suffered for her sake. He often wondered at, and was angry with, his nephew for not seeming sufficiently to value a pearl of such price. And he looked with deepest suspicion and disgust on the new *rapprochement* between him and Lady Mildred, whom, in his thoughts, he called by so ugly a name as "the devil incarnate."

Lord and Lady Ravenhold had never been separated for twenty-four hours since their marriage. When, therefore, her husband informed Vanessa one morning at breakfast that he had just received an invitation to fish and stay the night down in Hampshire, and intended to accept it, a severe pang went to her heart, and she felt as though some dire calamity had befallen her. The tears came to her eyes, her lips trembled in spite of her.

"Must you stay the night? Cannot you come back by a late train?"

"No," he answers; "because I want to fish all the next day, and to return in the evening. My dear child"—impatiently—"don't be ridiculous! Do you suppose we are to go through the remainder of our lives without ever spending a night apart?"

Vanessa says no more. If he wishes to leave her; if it is no pain, but rather a pleasure to him to be parted from her, what is there left to say? If business compelled his absence, and he went with reluctance, it would be different; she would hate him to go all the same, but the pain would have been robbed of its worst sting.

Ravenhold gets out his fishing-tackle and departs next morning with joy. He kisses her with the exuberance of affection that a man generally exhibits when he is joyfully leaving his wife. He bids her heartily to enjoy herself, and to have "a good time" in his absence.

As soon as he is gone, foolish Vanessa, feeling a terrible sense of bereavement and desolation, proceeds to count the hours until she will be reunited with him. She has cheerful thoughts of railway accidents; of deaths by drowning. The colonel, who comes to take her out, does his very best to cheer and enliven her, but in vain. She does not attempt to account for or excuse her melancholy; but that would be needless. He knows the cause well enough, though he refrains from even seeming to perceive her depression. She dines alone. After dinner she takes a book, and tries to read, but her mind does not grasp the sense of the printed page; she is reading about Gerard all the time. Presently the postman's loud knock resounds through the house. She rouses herself, and brushes away the traitorous tears from her eyes. A moment later the servant comes in with a letter. Slowly and mechanically she opens it and reads. At the first few words she springs to a sitting posture. She reads to the end. Then she pushes her hair from her forehead with a wild, affrighted gesture, and falls back in her chair half fainting, white and cold as death.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THESE are the contents of the letter:

"You think, no doubt, because you have gone through with the marriage ceremony with Lord Ravenhold that you are his wife. But supposing that he had taken part in the same ceremony previously with another woman, who is still alive, you would understand at once, would you not? that you have no right whatever to the name of Lady Ravenhold. It is I who bear that title. After the divorce took place, I went on my bended knees to him, I entreated him to marry me. I dare say he has told you—indeed, I know he has told many people that he never cared for me. That is false. He was, or seemed to be, as devoted to me as ever he was to you. Do you think, if he had not been, I should have sacrificed everything for his sake? It is quite true that afterward he tried to get out of it—he got

tired of me as he does of every woman—no doubt by this time he is tired of you too. I *made* him marry me, and we went to America together. After a little time he began to reproach me, and to say that I had cursed his life, and I grew so miserable and heart-broken that I consented to conceal our marriage and to be treated like a cast-off mistress. Ever since then I have loved and hated him by turns. And now I say to myself, ‘Why should he be happy when I am broken-hearted?’ So I have come back to London to unmask him, and to let the world know that I am Lady Ravenhold. I am sorry for you, but I owe you nothing—you have taken him away from me—it is just as fair that you should suffer as that I should. And no doubt he is tired of you by now.

CLARA RAVENHOLD.”

When Vanessa recovered herself, she took up the letter and read it through, every word of it, again. She felt no bitterness against the writer; she could only think of him. He, for his passion’s sake, had wantonly wrecked her life—he had had no pity for her; had not thought of the consequences that discovery would bring on her. And yet he could smile and be gay—he bore no traces of his awful secret in his face or manner—no doubt he fancied himself perfectly secure.

And now what is she to do? She has henceforth no name, no social status—there is nothing left for her but to hide herself out of the world’s way—the world that might pretend to pity her, but would, in reality, pass by on the other side. Her duty as a virtuous woman is to leave his roof—to separate herself from him forever. At first she thinks she will do this—that, to-morrow, she will go down home and never see him more. But, as the minutes creep on, the conviction comes to her that there are tasks which a human heart can impose upon itself and yet be powerless to fulfill, and this is one of them. Unless he bids her go, she cannot leave him—she already forgives him—if he has sinned; if he has drawn her into sin, it was, at least, for love’s sake of her. No! she will not leave him. She will quit London and the gay world, but she must cling to him or die. One day, perchance, he will forsake her as he forsook that other unhappy woman, and then, oh, then, *perhaps*, a merciful God will surely take pity upon her and let her die. God! But will He have pity upon her if she sins wantonly against Him? Will He not visit her with still more terrible punishments?

The clock strikes eleven. She locks up the letter that has brought this blight upon her life and goes to bed. To bed, but not to sleep. She has but one desire: to hear from Gerard’s lips if it is true. Fain would she believe it a malicious lie; but there seems a ring of truth about it—small doubt that it is written by one who knows his character all too well.

At half past seven she rings up her maid. Dalton would be much displeased at this inconsiderateness on her ladyship’s part, but that the moment she sets eyes on her death-white face and haggard eyes, she is frightened, and feels that something very serious is the matter.

“Oh, dear, my lady, how ill you look! Hadn’t I better send for the doctor?”

"No," answers Vanessa, feeling the impossibility of accounting to any one for the state of her mind. "Not at present, at least. I want to send a telegram. The office opens at eight, I think. Get me a form, and tell one of the men to be ready."

Dalton obeys. She will, in any case, have the satisfaction of reading the telegram. It is to Lord Ravenhold, and says:

"Come to me without fail the instant you get this. Telegraph that you are coming."

When this is dispatched, Vanessa allows Dalton to bring her some tea, and endeavors to possess her soul in patience. Perhaps she may get an answer in an hour, certainly in two. She busies herself in making plans. When she has seen him, if it is true, she will leave London at once and go home. But what can she say to her father? She cannot tell him the truth. In his capacity as a clergyman he will be bound to try to separate her from Ravenhold. But she tells herself that it is not likely he will ask any questions.

Ten o'clock strikes, eleven, twelve, and so the awful hours creep on, and no answering message comes from Ravenhold. Then a horrid fear takes possession of her. Perhaps he is not in Hampshire at all. She denies herself to all callers, even to the colonel and Hermione, who both come to visit her—she could not meet them.

She paces up and down the room distraught with nervous terror. Now she can only believe the worst. If he has received it, he has read the riddle of her urgent telegram and is afraid to meet her.

The thought comes to her over and over again that is wont to smite people who are young and have been happy, "How have I deserved this awful misery? Oh, God! what have I done in my short life that I should suffer such agony?"

Five o'clock. Worn out in mind and body, she is lying on the sofa. Despair has overcome her. She has no longer any hope. Suddenly the double rap of the telegraph boy makes her start up. She waits breathless until the orange-colored envelope is brought in, then tears it open.

"*Shall be home by six.*"

She lies back again. At all events, she will soon know now. And she worst news can hardly be so terrible as the agony of suspense. Fifty-five minutes more. Then a hansom dashes up to the door. She hears Ravenhold's eager step mounting the stairs. Now he is in the room; he is by her side with an anxious face, crying:

"Great heavens! My darling! how ill you look. What is the matter?"

A deadly trembling seizes her. She cannot return his embrace. She gives him the letter, which she holds crushed in her hand ready for him; and, as he reads, she devours his face with her eyes. She sees surprise, curiosity there, but not guilt. When he has finished, he crumples it up in his hand, and, turning to her, exclaims in a wondering voice:

"Gracious God! And you believed it!"

No answer comes from her pale lips—the revulsion of feeling is too great—she has swooned dead away.

When her senses return, she is in bed, with the doctor bending over her, and Ravenhold standing at the foot, with an anxious face. She is puzzled at first to know what has happened, but by and by her memory slowly returns. A sense of ineffable happiness steals over her; he is hers—her very own. When the doctor departs, having prescribed perfect quiet, she beckons her darling to her. He is very tender and gentle; holds her in his arms, strokes her hair, kisses her broad eyelids. Happy tears steal down her cheeks; but she is too weak and languid to say much. But presently she feels so much better that she insists on going down to dinner, and in the evening she is well enough to talk the matter over with him.

“It is that fiend of a woman, I suppose,” he says. “She must have set spies upon me, or how could she know that I was away? I’ll turn the tables upon her, and, by God! if I catch her I——” and his handsome face takes a more vindictive expression than one would have believed it capable of. “But,” altering his tone to one of tender reproach, “what I cannot understand is how it took you in. You must have a nice opinion of me if you think I could be such a blackguard?”

Vanessa laces her arms round his broad shoulders, and hides her face in his neck.

“If it had been true,” she whispers, “I should have stayed with you all the same,” and Ravenhold catches her to his heart and kisses her passionately.

As he has got into the habit of telling Lady Mildred everything—nearly everything—he goes to see her a day or two later to relate this exciting story.

Her ladyship appears deeply interested in the recital.

“What fiends people are!” she exclaims. “Could one believe such wickedness possible?”

“If I only catch her at any more of her tricks!” cries Ravenhold, grinding his teeth.

“I suppose you have not the letter with you?”

“Indeed I have,” taking it out of his pocket-book. “It is not her writing, but still it may be a clew some day.”

“It is rather an uneducated hand,” observes Lady Mildred, scrutinizing it carefully.

“Yes. By Jove! I have half a mind to offer a hundred pounds reward if the writer will come forward.”

“Yes,” says Lady Mildred, “I would.” Then, after a moment’s pause, “I don’t know. Perhaps it would be better to let it rest. You don’t want that story raked up again, and it would not look very well for you to prosecute a woman who ruined her life on your account. People might say nasty things.”

Ravenhold is silent. Certainly there is something in Lady Mildred’s argument.

“She had better not try it on again,” he says, presently. “You’ve no idea what a state that poor child was in. The doctor said the effects might have been most serious. I was obliged to tell him she had received an anonymous letter, though of course

I did not hint at its contents. Poor darling! she is awfully fond of me! there is no doubt about that! Do you know, Milly," with an unusual softness in his eyes and voice, "she confessed to me that even if it had been true, she would not have left me."

Lady Mildred's eyes flash.

"Do you suppose," she says, impetuously, "that *any* woman who cared for a man would leave him if she heard that he had fifty wives?"

When Lord Ravenhold has departed, she sits staring in front of her, with sightless eyes. Her heart is bitter within her. There has evidently been a *rapprochement* between the pair in consequence of this affair.

"But I made her suffer," she mutters between her closed teeth. "Ah! if I could make her endure half the pangs that she has made me feel day and night. But some day! some day!"

For a week or two after the affair of the letter Ravenhold behaved with the greatest affection to his wife. He drove her out; he walked with her. The colonel's services were scarcely required at all. But Charles Dallas was not by any means piqued, being far too fond of Vanessa not to rejoice at seeing her happy.

Edith Vaughan had returned to society, proof against any man's vows or protestations, and she and Lady Ravenhold were frequently together. One day she happened to remark before her grandfather, that she was afraid poor Vanessa was not so happy as she might be, and that it was a great shame her husband should pay so much attention to Lady Mildred, when every one knew how they had been talked about in former days. The baronet pricked up his ears, and, after a moment's pause, remarked that no doubt Lady Ravenhold was a monstrous dull woman, and, like most handsome people, carried all her wares in her windows.

As for Mab, she had become the most decorous of matrons, and was quite wrapt up in Sir Thomas (she has left off calling him Sir Tummas and making fun of him) and the young Sir Thomas. Her strictures upon married women who flirt were more than severe—they were crushing. The smallest joke of a libertine nature drew her straight brows together, and turned down the corners of her mouth. Her grandfather said she was a d——d bore with her prim, methodistical ways. As for Sir Thomas, he made a moral Juggernaut of his lady, and was ever ready to prostrate himself beneath her chariot-wheels. She was, however, merciful as she was strong. Even the black pearl had not been removed. She declared that she had got used to it, and rather liked it than not. It gave character to Sir Thomas' face.

July has come, and people are beginning to think how they can spend the autumn most agreeably—the autumn, and what yet remains of summer.

Ravenhold talks of Goodwood, Cowes, and Scotland. Vanessa has been building on a visit to her father. She does not object to Goodwood, but Cowes has no temptation for her, as she is a most indifferent sailor. Scotland can be delayed until September, and she thinks, firstly, that it is her duty to go and see her

father, and, secondly, that it will be entrancingly delightful to have her darling all to herself once more, away from Lady Mildred and other dangerous and evil-disposed sirens.

She has broached her wishes to her lord, and has been pained to see by the expression of his face that the idea does not fill him with rapture. He has not, however, at present said anything to lead her to the belief that he does not intend to fall in with her views.

For himself, he likes excitement, sport, good living; not one of which is he in the least likely to get down at the quiet Vicarage; he thinks Vanessa ought to see at once that there is nothing earthly for him to do there.

Filer le parfait amour! No! one does not do it twice with the same woman! and he has had his fill of that long ago.

He says confidently to Lady Mildred one afternoon when he is paying her his usual visit:

"I'm afraid there'll be the devil to pay with my wife about our autumn plans. She wants to spend August with her father."

"Well," returns Lady Mildred, briskly, "I suppose she does not contemplate taking you. What on earth would there be for you to do?"

"That's just it," he says, with mournful perplexity. "If she were like any one else, she wouldn't expect it. She would go and do her duty visit, and give me a little holiday meantime."

"But of course she will," remarks Lady Mildred, cheerfully. "She will have her father, and if she is so fond of you, it can't be any pleasure to her to know you are being bored to death."

"One would think not," and Ravenhold assumes an air of profound dejection. "There is nothing earthly to do there but lounge about on a garden seat—one can't get the papers until the second day, or have anything but mutton or pork, or those everlasting fowls for dinner."

He forgets his delight last year in lounging on garden seats, with his arm round his adored one. As for news—what cared he for the doings of the outer world? and with regard to the food, it was all ambrosia to him so long as his darling graced the board.

The picture seems as attractive in Vanessa's eyes as ever; but to Ravenhold it only suggests weariness and disgust. And yet they say that women are inconstant.

"Where do you want to go?" inquires Lady Mildred.

"After Goodwood I want to go to Cowes. Blank has asked me."

"Oh, do go!" entreats Lady Mildred. "He has asked me too."

"My wife is such a bad sailor—it would be purgatory to her."

"But, my dear friend, are you not to go on the sea because it makes her ill? Are you to eat, drink, and avoid all that she does? I don't remember that stipulation in the marriage service."

Ravenhold utters a deep, deep sigh.

"There is no doubt," he says, "that marriage is an awful tie."

"Not where people are sensible."

"I don't think women ever are sensible," utters his lordship, lugubriously.

"Some women are not. How can a woman expect to keep a man's love if she is always tugging at the chain and selfishly wanting him to do everything just as she pleases?"

Ravenhold returns home determined to come to an understanding with his wife. He says to her gayly, although in reality he feels rather nervous, that after Goodwood, he will take her down to her father and leave her there for a bit. He has promised Blank to spend the Cowes week on his yacht.

The thought of being separated from her beloved for a week is more than Vanessa can endure, and she answers impulsively:

"I will go too, then, if you must go. They have asked me, and I would rather be ill than away from you all that immense time."

Ravenhold neither looks nor feels flattered.

"That is all nonsense," he says, sharply. "What is the use of making yourself ill and wretched for nothing? Besides, I thought you were so keen about going to your father?"

"So I am; but not without you," replies Vanessa, her eyes brimming over with tears.

"Upon my soul!" exclaims Ravenhold, "I never saw such a woman as you. One can't discuss anything with you but you fall into a flood of tears."

"I never used to cry," says Vanessa, with a little sob; "not from one year's end to another."

"Which, I suppose," he retorts, "is a convincing proof that I am an utter brute, and treat you shamefully."

"I never said so—never thought so," sobs poor Vanessa.

"Why did you ever pretend to be fond of me, if your only anxiety now is to get away from me?"

"My good child!" cries her husband, impatiently, "it seems to me as though you have no reasoning faculties. I should be too delighted if you could come to Cowes, but I suppose I can't help your being sea-sick. It seems to me you are rather selfish. You want to drag me down to your father's, where I shall be bored to death, and sha'n't get a bit of decent food to eat."

"You were happy enough last year," says Vanessa, deeply affronted; her eyes flashing.

"Perhaps I was. The circumstances were different then. One doesn't always want to do the same thing. When I was a boy, I was devoted to jam-tarts and chocolate—now I have had enough of them."

"Do you mean by that you have had enough of me?" cries Vanessa, wounded to the quick.

"Oh, for Heaven's sake, don't let us have a row!" cries Ravenhold, making for the door, and banging it after him.

CHAPTER XXXII.

VANESSA is dreadfully unhappy after this scene. Her mind is torn by a hundred conflicting feelings. The most poignant

thought is that her husband wishes for, looks forward to, a temporary separation from her. He has accused her of selfishness in desiring to keep him with her or to accompany him. She asks herself if her love is really selfish—if she is actually consulting her own feelings only. But it seems to her that, if he cares for her, it ought to be as great pain to him to be parted from her as for her to be parted from him. Such, however, is evidently not the case. Shall she consent, and, if possible, with a good grace, to this dreadful separation? She makes up her mind to try.

When they meet again, she hangs on his shoulder, and, letting fall some more of those pearls which she cannot restrain, she tells him that she consents to his going to Cowes. He embraces her joyfully, asserting that it will be quite the best way. But then, feeling exceedingly bitter at his evident jubilation, she cries:

“But, after that, you must not leave me any more. Where you go, I shall go with you.”

So Ravenhold dares not for the present say anything about going to Scotland for the twelfth.

It is arranged that he shall take her home, stay a couple of nights, and then go on to Cowes. When this is settled, Lady Mildred, meeting Vanessa at dinner, says in a sweetly condoling tone to her:

“What a thousand pities that you are a bad sailor! We shall be such a cheery party on the *Voyageuse*. But I dare say you will be happier with your father, after all.”

The blow is so sudden that, for a moment, Vanessa can find nothing to reply. Then she murmurs some incoherent words, and turns to speak to another woman, and Lady Mildred’s heart leaps with malicious delight.

Lord Ravenhold has not been two minutes in the brougham with his wife on the way home from this dinner before he knows that something is wrong.

“What is the matter with you?” he asks.

Her heart beats to suffocation—she cannot all at once find breath to accuse him. He repeats his question.

“The matter is,” she says, unable to prevent the passion of her heart from flowing to her voice—“the matter is that I now know why you were so keen about your yachting trip, and so anxious that I should not go with you.”

“What do you mean?” asks Ravenhold extremely disconcerted.

“I think you know,” she answers; her voice, in spite of her, taking an angrier and more excited tone. “*That woman* is to be there, and you are going on purpose to meet her.”

“You seem to know more than I do,” he remarks, trying to speak all the more coolly because he is annoyed and uncomfortable at Vanessa having made the discovery. “I had arranged to go before I knew that she was to be one of the party. Who told you that she was going?” he proceeds, imprudently.

“She told me herself,” cries Vanessa—“told me triumphantly on purpose to wound me.”

"What folly!" cries Ravenhold; "what ridiculous ideas you take into your head! Why, in Heaven's name, should she want to wound you?"

"Because I took you from her," cries Vanessa, passionately. "And now I only wish she had you."

This is, of course, a wicked falsehood; but even the most truthful people will sometimes make mendacious assertions under the influence of passion.

"No, you don't," replies Ravenhold, trying to put his arm round her. But she makes the most vigorous resistance to his attempted endearment.

His lordship feels very angry with Lady Mildred for having told his wife of their projected meeting, and does not fail to call on her next day to express his vexation.

She meets him with the sweetest, the most innocent smile.

"But, my dear boy," she says, "of course I thought she knew it. How imprudent of you not to tell her! She was bound to hear it sooner or later, and then, if it had been kept a secret, she would have been twice as suspicious and angry."

"It's infernally unlucky," observes Ravenhold, gloomily; "but she has taken it into her head to be frightfully jealous of you."

"Of me?" says Lady Mildred, feigning surprise, whilst her heart dances with delight. "Surely not of me, when she had ample proof of your preference!"

There is a sarcastic inflection in her voice which is not lost upon her companion. He takes her hand, and his eyes grow softer.

"Perhaps, after all," she says, with a quivering lip, "I might have made you as happy as she has done."

History does not record his answer.

Lady Ravenhold, for the first time since she acquired that title, maintains a cold demeanor to her lord. Always before, she has been angry for five minutes, ten have found her hiding her face in Gerard's breast, in fifteen she has been smiling up at him. But now, twenty-four, thirty-six, forty-eight hours still leave her cold, unreconciled, proof against his endearments, his efforts after reconciliation. The blow is such a bitter one—she cannot forget the anguish she will have to suffer—she thinks it a disgrace before all the world that her husband should leave her during a whole week, and leave her for a woman whose lover every one knows he was in bygone days.

Vanessa half resolves in her tortured heart to bid him once for all choose between them; half resolves to tell him that if he goes to Cowes and Lady Mildred, he shall never come back to her; but suppose he took her at her word? She knows well enough she could not carry out her threat; that before a week was over she would go to him on her knees praying to be taken back, and promising him utter and perfect liberty in the future. But she remains cold in her manner to him, and he is worried and put out, because he is still in love with her to a certain extent, and would be very much more so if she could only refrain from letting him see how she idolizes him.

It, however, makes one thing certain—he dares not give the

least hint of leaving her again to go to Scotland, but makes up his mind to endure a fortnight or three weeks at the Vicarage.

"I shall have to go and stagnate in that dull hole," he says to Lady Mildred.

"I think you are very weak," she answers, rather contemptuously.

"Hang it all!" he returns, "one can't keep on quarreling with a woman. Especially under the circumstances."

"Oh!" utters Lady Mildred, with a curl of her lip. "I was not aware there were any circumstances. No doubt," with increased scorn, "you will soon be a pattern married man!"

When Ravenhold leaves her, Lady Mildred throws herself back in her chair and begins to think. A delightful inspiration comes to her.

The next evening she is to meet Sir Bertram Orford at dinner at the house of an intimate friend. She writes a line to her intending hostess:

"CHERE BELLE,—Arrange to let Sir Bertram take me in to dinner to-morrow, or, if that is not possible, put him on my other side. I don't want to marry him. Yours ever, MILLY."

Her friend, willing to please her, defies the laws of precedence for once, and gives her to Sir Bertram as a partner, rather to the surprise of some of the guests. If it were a young man, or some particular friend of Lady Mildred's, it would be intelligible—still there must be a motive, for it is quite certain that Lady H— knows what is right."

Lady Mildred is not long in breaking the ice.

"Do you know," she says, looking into the old baronet's face with a sweet, ingenuous smile, "I asked Hilda to let me go in with you."

Sir Bertram gives his politest "smile by machinery," and says, with all the courtliness of the past generation:

"Indeed, Lady Mildred? I feel myself excessively honored and flattered."

Inwardly he is wondering to himself what the devil the woman would be at. She can scarcely want to marry him, being extremely well off, and having one or two eligible suitors besides.

"You took me in to dinner once before," proceeds her ladyship. "Do you remember? I do"—with a fascinating glance. "Your conversation was so amusing and interesting. I never enjoyed a dinner more. Most men of the present day are so stupid, or so greedy, they won't take the trouble to amuse one."

Sir Bertram, being a man, is by no means impervious to flattery. The suspicion that her ladyship has designs upon him begins to fade away. She is a sensible, appreciative woman—that is all. He devotes himself to keeping up the good opinion she has formed of him, and the flavor of his caustic wit is eminently agreeable to Lady Mildred, who is exceedingly malicious herself, and enjoys nothing so much as hearing her friends turned into ridicule, or tearing their reputation into shreds herself.

She is too clever to reveal her designs at present, but bids Sir

Bertram lunch with her next day, and he accepts the invitation with effusion. She assures him, as he sits beside her after dinner, that it is long since she passed so pleasant an evening. She smiles sweetly at him when he squeezes her slim fingers with his bony ones.

Next day Sir Bertram keeps his rendezvous with military punctuality, and is well pleased to find her ladyship alone. The thought again shapes itself in his mind that she may have matrimonial designs upon him. The idea does not alarm him.

The choicest of luncheons is provided for him, an attention which he thoroughly appreciates. When it is over, his hostess offers him a box of fine cigars.

"My dear Lady Mildred," he exclaims, with old-fashioned gallantry, "you are the pearl of hostesses. But I have never permitted myself to fall into the lax manners of the day. Nothing would induce me to commit such an act of desecration in your presence."

And although her ladyship declares that she likes nothing in the world so much as the smell of a cigar, he is proof against her persuasions.

When they have adjourned to her boudoir, Lady Mildred commences her parallels.

She is so glad the London season will soon be over. She loves the sea. The Cowes week is always to her the pleasantest in the year; but, after that, where shall she go? At Homburg, Dinard, Trouville, one meets people whom one is sick to death of seeing in London. She does not care for Scotland: one leaves summer behind when one crosses the border; and in country-houses, most country-houses, there is a repetition, in a small way, of town habits and customs, but these are even more *genantes* than in London, because one cannot escape from them. What she longs for is repose, perfect repose in some lovely part of the country where she could wander about—a charming old garden, with a book, or sometimes a congenial spirit, or perhaps her own thoughts for company.

Sir Bertram's intelligence is remarkably quick. He understands in a moment that her ladyship wishes to be invited to his country-seat.

"Ah, dear Lady Mildred!" he answers with *empressement*, "my little place is just the rural paradise you describe, though without the congenial spirit, I fear."

"I cannot allow that," says her ladyship, softly.

"But that I dare not run the risk of afflicting you with the most terrible *ennui*, how charmed I should be to play host to so delightful a guest!"

"I wish you would ask me," says Lady Mildred. "There is nothing, nothing in the world I should like so much."

"And suppose you died of *ennui*?"

"You would bury me in your churchyard, and put up a monument to me, with the inscription:

" 'The victim of too much happiness.' "

"May I positively believe that you are not jesting—that you

will spend a few days—I wish I dare say months—at the Hall?”

“I will go to you straight from Cowes, if you will have me.”

“If!” cries Sir Bertram, gallantly. “And now, whom shall I ask to meet you?”

“No one, no one, no one at all!” cries Lady Mildred. “That would spoil everything.”

“But consider, my dear lady, there will be only myself, my daughter, and her daughter; both excellent women in their way, but dull to a degree. I do not want to frighten you, but I should forever lament your suffering a *desillusion* in my house. Come! name some one at least whom I may invite to meet you.”

“No; I will not have a single person except yourselves,” cries Lady Mildred, with pretty resolution. “Besides, you know, if the worst you anticipate happened, the Ravenholds will be at the Vicarage.”

In one instant Sir Bertram reads the cards in her ladyship's hand. A curious effect follows this clairvoyance. He feels a sense of wounded vanity mingled with malicious pleasure. But he does not betray himself by so much as the wink of an eyelash.

“Ah! true,” he remarks. “Lady Ravenhold will not, I fear, contribute much to your amusement. She is a monstrous dull woman, though handsome; but Ravenhold is a capital fellow and excellent company.”

“What a judge of character you are, Sir Bertram!” exclaims Lady Mildred, with a radiant expression of face. “That is precisely the estimate I have formed of the pair.”

“Then,” says the baronet, “we must try to see as much of Ravenhold, and as little of her ladyship, as possible.”

Shortly afterward he departs, and Lady Mildred hugs her delight to her breast, and pays her own tact and cleverness a thousand compliments. She does not for one instant guess that Sir Bertram has seen *le dessous des cartes*, and is playing into her hands for his own purposes.

There is a sardonic grin on the old man's lips as he walks away from her ladyship's house. He is about to have his dearest passion, revenge, gratified. His bitterness against Vanessa has increased with her good fortune; he cherishes a malignant hatred of her—any weapon that can wound her is precious to him. He knows all about the former history of Ravenhold and Lady Mildred. He has met them in society, and has not failed to observe that the lady's attachment has not diminished, and that Ravenhold seems very kindly disposed to her in return.

He feels no displeasure against Lady Mildred for having made a cat's-paw of him. All women are arch plotters, and false as hades. He will joyfully help her pluck her chestnuts from the fire; and there seems little chance of his burning his own fingers.

Lady Mildred does not, for the present, deem it advisable to say one word to Ravenhold about her invitation. She thinks it quite probable that he might set his face against it, as being sure to cause a scene with his wife, whose anger he is far from

desiring to arouse, and Lady Mildred knows very well that her power over him is as yet by no means as strong as Vanessa's, and that, if it came to choosing between them, it would be she who would go to the wall. His own pride and obstinacy, and his wife's reproaches, will in time be much more effective in alienating the pair than any love he may feel for her. A week at Cowes with him; a fortnight in the country, when he will be sure to take refuge in her and at the Hall from the intolerable dullness of the Vicarage, and she expects great and most satisfactory results. If Lady Ravenhold makes jealous scenes, as of course she will, Lady Mildred's designs will be enormously benefited. If a man is forbidden to see a woman, he straightway desires her society, even if he has not thought very much about her before.

Lady Mildred has no religion nor principle. Long ago the voice of her conscience has ceased to speak. She does not believe in a future state; neither love nor fear of God influence her actions.

She hates Vanessa with all the energy of her nature. She has distorted her in her thoughts into a scheming, unprincipled woman like herself; a woman who by wiles has seduced her lover away from her.

Was not Ravenhold her (Lady Mildred's) devoted slave until this fair-faced woman, whose beauty she loathes, yet cannot deny, came and coaxed him from her? When her husband died, and by every sense of right and fairness Ravenhold should have married her, did not this hateful, intriguing wretch step in and separate them again? Did she deserve pity at her hands? No, it should be war *a l'outrance*. If she could make her wretched; if she could alienate her husband's love from her, she would take advantage of every weapon that chance or skill placed in her way. It was burnt in on her brain that Vanessa had willfully, wantonly wronged her, and she longed madly for revenge. And she believed firmly in her heart of hearts that it would be granted her.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE day which Vanessa dreaded intolerably was approaching—the day of her separation from her beloved one. Long ago she had abandoned her cold demeanor toward him, being incapable of remaining estranged, but she never forgot for a moment the sword which hung suspended over her head. One night she had indeed gone on her knees to him, had thrown her beautiful arms round him, and sobbed her heart out, entreating him not to leave her. It would kill her, she cried, and she felt as if she were prophesying a truth. Ravenhold wavered. He kissed, and soothed, and consoled her. He would not promise, but he was half resolved to give up his trip. He went next morning to Lady Mildred.

"Upon my soul!" he said, with a harassed air, "I don't think I ought to leave my wife; she seems so awfully cut up at the thought!"

The blood flies like fire through Lady Mildred's veins. She longs passionately to mock and deride him; to laugh him to scorn. It requires all the strength of will she possesses to keep her voice calm.

"You see," she says, after a moment's pause, "this is your first struggle. It depends on who wins this who will be master for the rest of your lives. If you are not firm now, you may throw up all your chances of peace or pleasure in the future. A woman has such a pull over a man in being able to cry and have hysterics. A man feels a brute, whilst she is all the time laughing in her sleeve."

Ravenhold looks out of the window with a gloomy brow, but her words carry conviction with them; he feels that if he is ever to enjoy freedom, he must make a stand for it now.

"Good-bye, Milly," he says, taking her hand. "I wish to God I had never promised to go!"

And he departs with a melancholy air, leaving a thorn behind him in the breast of Lady Mildred. She is by no means sure of him even now. After luncheon Ravenhold says to his wife:

"My dear child, I don't really see how I can get out of this party. You know I hate to do anything to vex you, but I think, having promised, I ought to go. It won't be for long, darling."

Suddenly an intuition leaps to Vanessa's brain. She looks up and fixes her eyes on his.

"Have you seen Lady Mildred this morning?" she asks in a very calm, quiet voice.

Ravenhold is taken unawares—he grows crimson and horribly confused. He cannot deny it—perhaps, by some means or other, she is aware of his visit.

"Yes, I have," he answers, a shade defiantly. "I don't quite see what that has to do with it."

"Do you not? I do," she replies, and this time there is a burning scorn in her voice. But her heart turns deathly cold. After all his vows of love, after all his passion, which seemed so real, this woman has more power over him than she. She does not say one other word—she gives up—she knows herself vanquished, defeated. But when Gerard approaches her, she shudders violently and puts up her hands to ward him off.

He goes out of the house, saying to himself that marriage is an accursed institution, and that none but fools bind themselves with its heavy and needless shackles. His only consolation, and that is a very mixed one, is that he has asserted his independence; but at what a cost! He is pretty sure this will not be the end of the warfare—his advantage is only a temporary one, which he may have more occasion to regret than a defeat.

If Vanessa were a woman of the world, if she were capable of acting a part, she would now put on a cheerful air, as though his going away were a matter of complete indifference to her, and she would single out some good-looking young man of her acquaintance and embark on a slight flirtation with him. This would speedily bring Ravenhold to his senses, and be more effective than all the tears and reproaches in the world.

Vanessa is only a loving and tender-hearted woman, incapable of pretending anything, or of concealing her immense love for her husband. He behaves with the greatest attention and affection to her during the few days that intervene between their parting, but all the time he has a sense of guilt that makes him uncomfortable and annoys him exceedingly. He blames Lady Mildred for persuading him to go—he blames Vanessa much more for not being like other women.

He accompanies her down to the Vicarage, and stays there two nights—is most cordial to his father-in-law and to Susan, and extremely affectionate to Vanessa. But that one dull day there with nothing to do makes him rejoice heartily that he had remained firm about the yachting-party. Vanessa, when she hangs on his neck at parting, cannot sulk or reproach—an awful feeling haunts her that they may never meet again—how, then, can she part from him in anger?

He is in his gayest mood; bids her cheer up and enjoy the society of her father and Susan, interest herself in her garden, and the pigs and chickens, and comports himself with the tact and considerateness generally employed by Theseus bound on a pleasure trip leaving his Ariadne on the rock.

He is gone. She has received his last embrace; she has watched his handsome, smiling face diminish in the distance as the carriage drives off, has caught the last wave of his hand as it turned the corner. And then a blank, a sense of desolation creeps over her such as she has never known before; not even when Brandon died. But, oh! she feels she could bear this parting with a light heart if he had not gone to the woman who is her rival; who hates her with a deadly hatred, and will leave nothing on earth untried to wrest her husband's love from her. And he had gone gladly—nay! why else should he have gone at all? his whole face was bright with pleasure and expectancy. And yet this time last year, what was there in this world that could have tempted him from her side? And, like all women, she failed to remember that with men the invariable sequence to passion is satiety; that the experience of most of her sisters is the same; but imagines that her own case is exceptional and that it is some most unfortunate fault or deficiency in herself that has caused the waning of his adoration.

Oh, wise Spartans! who, I have read, only permitted their young men to visit their wives secretly and by stealth; what adoring and faithful husbands must their system have produced! There is no doubt that the British nation least of all understands the economy of the affections. When the last sound of Ravenhold's chariot wheels has died away, Vanessa hies her with fleet steps to her chamber to enjoy the one solace of a grieved woman. She cannot curse or smoke, but she can cry. And Vanessa, who in her girlhood might certainly have counted her fits of crying on one hand, sobs and weeps until her lovely eyes are drowned and her eyelids swollen to twice their natural size. An hour later Susan, uneasy at her long seclusion, comes softly in without knocking, and finds her beautiful young mistress sitting on the

floor, her head resting against the bed, and all her frame convulsed with agony.

The faithful old servant's eyes fill with tears in a minute.

"Oh, my dear, dear young lady," she cries, stooping over her, and stroking her hair, "don't you take on like that! His lordship's only gone for a little time—not but what I think he didn't ought to have gone and left you."

The last words act like a tonic on Vanessa. No woman who adores her husband will allow even to her best friend that he can do wrong. She may reproach him to his face in private in no measured terms, but be quite sure that she will permit no one else to speak a word to his detraction, nor will she herself utter a complaint against him.

She rises from the floor, checks her sobs, and says, in a decided voice:

"No, no—he is quite right to go. It is foolish of me. I am only a little nervous and afraid of something happening to him."

"Why, bless you, my deary!" cries Susan, only anxious to comfort her darling, "what should happen?"

"He might be drowned," says Vanessa, and at this awful thought her tears begin to flow afresh.

"Now don't you think of that!" entreats her nurse. "Isn't his lordship as much under the A'mighty's eye on the hocean as well as if he was here? What is to be will be!" she continues, unconsciously imbued with the spirit of fatalism.

"But suppose it is his fate to be drowned!" cries Vanessa, and Susan finds herself unable to continue the argument. So she takes refuge in telling her ladyship that she must not give way, as it is so bad for her, especially now.

Under Susan's persuasion, Vanessa bathes her eyes with cold water and allows her hair to be smoothed. She had not brought her maid, reflecting that that young lady would cause embarrassment to Susan by her grandeur, to say nothing of the possibility of her declining to dine in a kitchen in company with Susan's handmaid. And Susan would be dreadfully hurt if she were not permitted to wait hand and foot upon her young lady.

Vanessa presently takes her way to the rose-bower, which has seen so many episodes in her, of late years, eventful life. She sits there with listless hands and heavy eyelids looking out at the bright sunshine, the blue sky, the gay-hued flower-beds. How often during the last six months has she thought of this fair spot; thought of it as a paradise, consecrated to the memory of love and happiness! It was an enchanted garden which would bring her blissful dreams the moment she set foot in it. But how is this? To-day it seems the dullest spot on earth—the scene before her is the acme of dreariness and desolation. Ah! it is not the place! The loveliest spot on earth is but a desert when, having lived there once with our dearest, we revisit it without him!

Vanessa finds it impossible to remain there; her heart becomes ~~like~~ lead in her breast; she has a wild thought of going off to

Cowes and stopping at the hotel, or somewhere within the reach of Gerard. When she returns to the house, Susan says, cheerfully:

"I've got a bit of news for you, my lady—I know you'll be pleased."

Vanessa's eyes light up. It must be something about Ravenhold—what other news could seem to her good in the very smallest degree?

"Miss Vaughan is coming to the Hall to-day. Miss Vaughan and Mrs. Vaughan and Sir Bertram."

A sense of disappointment steals over Vanessa; but, after a moment, she thinks it will be nice to have Edith—anything is better than this dreadful isolation.

That very evening a note comes from Edith begging her to go up and spend the next day at the Hall, and to stay to dinner, when Sir Bertram hopes Mr. Wentworth will join them. Lady Ravenhold writes a note of acceptance, and, when she and Edith meet, there is a greater show and feeling of affection between them than there has been for a long time. A woman in the early days of her marriage with a man she loves is entirely independent of her female friends. Edith, with no such rival to Vanessa, has remained unaltered, and is rejoiced at the new *rapprochement*.

They wander about the grounds together as of yore—they drive in the cool of the afternoon; just before dinner, Vanessa sees Sir Bertram for the first time.

He is delightful, courteous, gallant—the hinges of his smile extend to their utmost width. Edith has an indefinable dread that he is meditating some atrocity. And it is not long before she becomes aware of the nature of it. They are in the middle of dinner. The squire has been genial to a degree; the vicar is present; the servants are in the room.

"You will find it a little dull here just at present," he says, addressing Lady Ravenhold with great suavity, and fixing his eyes on her face; "but next week, I trust, things will look brighter. You will have your husband back—how you must miss him! and 'pon my life, how he must miss you—and we are expecting a very bright, charming lady here—a friend of yours and his—Lady Mildred Belair."

For a few moments after this speech the squire experiences a sensation of positive ecstasy—every line of Vanessa's face expresses her inward agony. She becomes deathly white—an awful sickness seizes her—she wonders if she can get out of the room without falling prone on the floor. After a few moments she recovers herself, and then she looks across at Edith with an *Et tu, Brute!* expression.

Edith is crimson—horror and indignation are in her face—it is evident that she too hears the news for the first time. Mrs. Vaughan looks uncomfortable; the vicar, lost in thought and never having heard Lady Mildred's name, eats his dinner peacefully, undisturbed by emotion of any kind.

The servants look like automatons, and are devoured with a burning curiosity to know "what's up."

Vanessa does not eat one other morsel. In the first place, she is incapable of swallowing; in the second, she resolves never, never to touch bread and salt again in the house of this cruel, malignant enemy. As a rule, a proud woman can master her feelings, but there are some blows so agonizing as to break down the proudest spirit.

She does not even attempt to talk to the squire after this. She replies by monosyllables to any remark he may make; she will not touch one drop of wine or even water though her tongue seems to cleave to the roof of her mouth, nor so much as one grape. Never once does she raise her eyes to his face.

"What a confounded fool she is to betray herself!" says the squire to himself, and he redoubles his attentions to her for the sheer sake of giving her pain.

Mrs. Vaughan does her utmost to make conversation with the vicar, so ominous is the hush that has fallen on the party—as for Edith, she is as voiceless and deprived of appetite as her friend. She burns with indignation—she has lost all fear of her terrible grandfather, and is perfectly capable of bearding him, of saying the bitterest things to him, in her present mood.

Mrs. Vaughan makes a move as soon as possible after dinner; then Edith, putting her arm through Vanessa's, leads her out into the garden. Not a word is said by either until they reach the summer-house near the lakelet; then Edith lays her head on her friend's shoulder and bursts into tears. Under ordinary circumstances, nothing would have induced her to allude to Lady Mildred and Lord Ravenhold in the same breath, but her sympathy is so great, she feels the occasion to be fraught with so terrible an importance, that it is impossible for her to remain silent.

For the present, Vanessa sits motionless, impassive; her eyes look across the water with a stony expression; her mouth is tense.

"He is the most wicked, hateful, abominable old man who ever lived, although he is my grandfather!" cries Edith. "To think that he should have nursed his wicked love of revenge all this time! Mab was quite right, three years ago, when she declared that he only asked Lord Ravenhold here because he was in hopes you would fall in love with him and that it might make you miserable, and now he has found out a new way of hurting you. It is too horrible!"

A quick light flashes to Vanessa's eyes, the color flows to her pale face; she clinches one hand; her voice takes a strange intensity.

"I have never, never until this moment," she says, "wished harm to any one in the world, but now I pray God to requite him for his wickedness!"

"And so do I!" cries Edith. "I feel as though I should not care if the most dreadful thing happened to him."

"You did not know it before?" says Vanessa. "No! I saw that by your face; but Mrs. Vaughan must have known."

"I will go this moment and ask her," exclaims Edith, starting up, and she takes her swift way across the turf to the house.

Vanessa does not attempt to stop her. She does not care what Mrs. Vaughan may think; the idea of all she loves being wrested from her stultifies every other feeling. She foresees her danger well enough. Gerard hates to be bored. She could see how long he found that one day at the Vicarage; now he had yawned and looked at his watch, and smoked countless cigarettes. He would be always up at the Hall with Lady Mildred. Sir Bertram (she ground her small teeth as she thought of him) would lose no opportunity of throwing them together. She had been Gerard's mistress once.

Oh, great God! what should she do; it—— She looked at the still water with wild eyes. If it came to that, she would drown herself—she could not live and bear such agony!

In a few minutes, Edith came flying back.

"Mamma has told me all. She is dreadfully vexed; but she did not know his object before. He ordered her ten days ago to write and ask Lady Mildred here when she left Cowes, and he said expressly that she was not to mention it to me. But now"—her excitement growing—"we must frustrate him somehow. Let us put our heads together; let us think what we can do to prevent their meeting here!"

"We cannot prevent it," utters Vanessa, in a voice out of which all hope and spirit are gone.

"But we will," says Edith, firmly. "I will do *my* best, if I break with grandpapa forever for it."

"It is no use fighting against fate," answers Vanessa, with profound melancholy.

"Fate!" cries Edith, with immense spirit; "we will alter fate, or, at all events, we will not allow it to become fate. After all, dearest, neither you nor I believe that your husband cares two straws for that horrid woman; and you are so beautiful, she cannot hold a candle to you."

"But she is so wicked," answers Vanessa, with a tone of profound conviction. "She *hates* me so—she will never rest until she has avenged herself upon me for taking Gerard from her. And if she does," sinking her voice to a whisper, "I shall die."

Something in her tone frightens Edith.

"No, no, no, do not talk such nonsense!" she cries, throwing her arms round her friend and kissing her pale cheek a dozen times. "It will never, never happen. And now, dearest, let us rack our brains to think what we shall do to circumvent this wicked old man; you think to-night, and I will think too—things come to one so much better in the night."

Vanessa heaves a long, hopeless sigh.

"I cannot see *him* again," she says, alluding to the squire—"do, Edie, fetch me my cloak and hat, and I will go home. You will make an excuse to my father. Do not make any to Sir Bertram. He," bitterly, "will understand quite well. Oh, Heaven, lifting her eyes to the darkened sky, "how can it make any one happy to torture others—to see them suffer!"

Edith goes to the house and fetches her own hat and her friend's.

"I will walk to the gate with you," she says, and, arm in arm, with sad hearts, they turn their steps toward the avenue.

Vanessa remembers that the very last time she came this way it was to meet Ravenhold, repentant of her cruelty to him. Is it possible, she wonders to herself now, that he was once the poor suppliant and she the tyrant?

As Edith returns alone to the Hall deep in thought, a sudden resolve comes to her. She will speak to her grandfather to-night. And though her heart beats to suffocation with the fear of him that has become a habit, she never wavers one instant from her determination.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE vicar has departed; Mrs. Vaughan retires to her room; Sir Bertram, as usual, when the rest of the family wish him good-night, goes to his sanctum. And there Edith follows him. Her knees knock together: she is terrified at what she is going to do; but still she does not shrink or falter. She thinks how glad she would be of Mab's company and countenance—Mab, who is so infinitely more courageous and difficult to daunt than she.

Edith gives a low rap at the door, and is answered by a sharp summons to enter. At one glance Sir Bertram guesses why she has come, and puts on his sternest, his most terrible manner. He does not ask what she wants, but continues to regard her with menacing eyes.

"Grandpapa," says poor Edith, utterly unable to control the tremor of her voice, "I have come to ask you a favor."

"Really!" he answers, in a biting tone. "And is it something of such immediate importance that it compels you to come to me at a time when I think you know it is particularly disagreeable to me to be disturbed?"

"I am very sorry," stammers Edith, "but it is of the greatest importance."

"Then pray, my dear," returns the squire, still speaking in the same tone, "take a chair, and if you could contrive to look a little less like a criminal at the dock it would make our interview more agreeable—at all events, to me."

Every word he utters increases the difficulty of her self-imposed task—a fact of which he is perfectly well aware—he loves to see people tremble before him, especially those who dare attempt to thwart him.

"I want to tell you something that I am sure you do not know," says Edith, in a low voice, and very far from carrying out her idea of bearding the squire. "Vanessa has a great dislike to Lady Mildred Belair—she would not like to meet her at all."

"But, my dear," observes the squire, with an innocent air, "I have not invited Lady Ravenhold to stay here. There is no reason on earth why they should even set eyes on each other."

"Oh, grandpapa, it is not that!" cries Edith—"it is because of Lord Ravenhold!"

"Either you are pleased to speak in parables or you are unable to express yourself intelligibly. First you say it is Lady Ravenhold who dislikes my intended guest, now you lay the dislike on Lord Ravenhold. Let them by all means remain away from the Hall whilst Lady Mildred is here."

"It is not that Lord Ravenhold does not like Lady Mildred," says Edith, ready to cry—"it is because he likes her, and that makes poor Vanessa unhappy."

"Pooh, pooh, my dear; what silly idea have you taken into your head? I fear your own little disappointment has slightly unhinged your mind on the subject of love and jealousy," remarks Sir Bertram, sardonically.

Edith does not need the gibe.

"Did you not see the effect your words had on her?" she cries. "Did you not see how white she turned? did you not notice that she never ate one morsel after you said that Lady Mildred was coming?"

"I imagined she was suffering from a little faintness incidental to ladies in delicate health," answers the squire, and he tells this stupendous lie with serene calmness.

"It was on account of Lady Mildred," cries Edith, with blazing cheeks. "I think it will be the death of her. Oh, grandpapa! I assure you this is the truth. Pray, pray do not have her here!"

"I am satisfied, my dear," returns the squire, "that you are laboring under a ridiculous mistake."

"But if she told me so with her own lips."

"The last thing a jealous woman does is to confess her jealousy."

"I am her greatest woman friend. I tell you, grandpapa, the thought drives her nearly mad. Oh, why, why are you so cruel? why do you want to be revenged on the poor child?"

"Revenged!" and a terrible lightning flashes into the old man's eyes. "Explain yourself this instant."

But Edith's fear is swallowed up in her anxiety for her friend.

"She knows it—we all know that you have never forgiven her. We know why you asked Lord Ravenhold here when poor Mr. Brandon was alive, and we know why you are asking Lady Mildred now."

"Oh!" says Sir Bertram, in a voice the quietness of which is awful, "this clairvoyance on your part must, I fear, be caused by hysteria. Pray go to your room. I will have restoratives taken there, and Jenkins shall be sent for the first thing in the morning."

Edith throws herself at his feet. Sir Bertram pulls the bell violently. Edith has scarcely time to rise before a servant hurries in.

"Send Miss Vaughan's maid at once!" cries the squire, imperiously. "She is taken very unwell!" and, to avoid exposure, Edith rushes from the room, and meets her maid on the stairs, looking very much alarmed.

"It is nothing, nothing," she says, making her way swiftly to

her room. A minute later there is a rap at the door, and a tray containing brandy and sal-volatile is handed in.

When Sir Bertram has, by his successful maneuver, dis-embarrassed himself of his granddaughter's presence, he sits calmly down to his writing-table, and pens the following note:

"DEAR EDITH,—Should your daughter attempt to treat me to another such scene as the one with which she favored me to-night, I shall be under the disagreeable necessity of shutting my doors forever on both her and you.

"Your affectionate father,

"BERTRAM ORFORD."

This he desires to be given to Mrs. Vaughan's maid to deliver the first thing next morning. He seals it, a precaution he invariably takes, as nothing would induce him to believe in any servant being actuated by the smallest sense of honor. Meantime, poor Edith is racking her brain for the means of helping her friend—the appeal to her grandfather has been far worse than useless, and she bitterly deplores her want of self-control in alluding to his desire for revenge and the cause thereof. The only conclusion she arrives at is that by some means or other Vanessa must be induced to leave the place during the time of Lady Mildred's visit; for it is quite certain that Lord Ravenhold cannot go to the Vicarage if his wife is away from it.

The next morning at eight o'clock her mother comes rushing to her room with Sir Bertram's letter to demand an explanation. It is in no measured terms that she denounces her daughter's folly when Edith relates the event of the previous evening; she weeps and threatens—she accuses Edith of wishing to break her heart (which, by the way, is as tough as it is small); she asks with angry impatience why in the world she cannot let other people's affairs alone; in short, there is a very serious scene between them. Edith dresses herself hastily and leaves the house by stealth for the Vicarage, determined, whatever happens, to be staunch to her friend.

She finds Lady Ravenhold still in bed, looking the picture of dejection and misery—she has lain awake all night making a thousand projects; but each and all are stultified by one terror—the terror of coming to an open rupture with Gerard. Edith says not one word of her interview with Sir Bertram the night before—she is thoroughly ashamed of her want of tact, and knows that Vanessa would never forgive her for having invoked the squire's mercy on her behalf.

Lady Ravenhold, seeing Edith's white face and red eyelids, feels comforted by her sympathy, and clasps her hand affectionately.

"My darling Nessa," cries Edith, "have you thought of something?"

"I have thought of a thousand things," answers Vanessa, wearily; "but they are all impossible. I am very silly. Of course I know that Gerard loves me—why else should he have married me? but I cannot help dreading that woman's influence. You see there is so little for him to do here, and he will be al-

ways going up to the Hall to be amused. And I never could pretend anything. I know I ought to laugh and be cheery, and try to amuse him, and defeat her, but I *could not* do it. I shall be miserable; I shall cry; I shall reproach him; and that will make him ten times worse, ten times more anxious to get away from me. He cannot bear to be found fault with."

"You *must* go away!" exclaims Edith. "Find any pretext you like, but *go*, and then he must join you. Oh, how I should delight to see her come here alone!"

"My dear child, it is impossible!" answers Vanessa. "Think what a fuss I have made—what invitations I have refused that I might come and stay with papa. How could I go away and leave him in less than a week?"

"My darling," cries Edith, "I don't want to hurt you, but now, truly, do you think your father would feel it very much? He is devoted to you, of course, but you know he is so wrapped up in his book that he grudges every hour spent away from it."

"That is true," answers Vanessa, mournfully. "But then, poor, dear Susan, how disappointed she would be!"

"Susan would rather endure anything in the world than see you unhappy."

"But where could I go?" says Vanessa.

"Where is Mrs. Fane?"

"I had a letter from her the day before yesterday. She wanted us to go down with her to Orange Court next Monday."

"That would be the very thing!" cries Edith.

But Lady Ravenhold only shakes her head with a dejected air.

"Well, if you won't," utters Edith, feigning to give up her persuasion. "Do you know, Nessa, I have had no breakfast? May I ask Susan for a cup of tea?"

"Oh, my poor child!" exclaimed Vanessa, stretching out her hand to the bell; but Edith runs out of the room, saying:

"No, no, I will ask her myself. Susan," she says, hurrying into the kitchen, "I have got a letter to write in the greatest hurry. What time does your post go out?"

"In a quarter of an hour, miss," answers Susan, amazed at Miss Vaughan's energy.

"Make me a cup of tea meantime, like a good creature, and then I have something most important to say to you. Not a word to her ladyship." And Edith proceeds to the drawing-room and dashes off a letter to Hermione.

"DEAR MRS. FANE,—Please don't think me mad. I am writing against time. You *must* by some means induce Vanessa to leave this before Saturday, and you *must* get Lord Ravenhold to meet her in London and *not* to come down here at present. I *implore* you to manage it *somehow*; otherwise I will not answer for the consequences. I have not time to explain now. Do telegraph to her—the nearest telegraph station is eleven miles.

"Sincerely yours,

"The Vicarage.

EDITH VAUGHAN."

Then she bethinks her of a P. S. that will probably give the necessary stimulus to Mrs. Fane's exertions.

"Lady Mildred Belair is coming here on Saturday—probably *with him*."

Then she flies to the post-office herself. She is just in time.

Susan has meanwhile laid her breakfast in great state in the dining-room.

"Susan," she utters, impressively, "I have something to say to you. If you hear a word about her ladyship leaving here at once, do all in your power to persuade her to go. I hardly think I ought to tell you why, only I know you love her like your own child."

"Ay," says Susan, "that I do, miss."

"You know everything about her. Of course you know that Sir Bertram wanted to marry her. Well, he has never forgiven her for refusing him, and has always tried to be revenged on her."

"Why, never!" cries Susan, aghast.

"And now," pursues Edith, breathlessly, "he has asked a lady to the Hall whom Lord Ravenhold was once fond of——"

"But surely," interrupts Susan, excitedly, "his lordship being a married man, and so fond of my young lady——"

"Of course, of course," says Edith. "But all the same, Nessa is so devoted to him that she might fancy things, and she is already dreadfully distressed."

"Well, then, miss, you let me alone for persuading her ladyship to go away."

"Yes; but for Heaven's sake don't let her think I have breathed a syllable to you!"

Then Edith hastily swallows a cup of tea, and returns to Vanessa with the most innocent air in the world.

"Susan gave me such a tremendous breakfast," she says. "And now I must be hurrying back; for if either grandpapa or mamma discovers that I have been with you, I shall get into the most awful disgrace."

And kissing her friend affectionately, she departs, rejoiced at what she has done. She has so much time for reflection during the rest of the day that it occurs to her that, if Vanessa should become aware that she has had anything to do with Mrs. Fane's next communication, her purpose may be defeated. She therefore intrusts a note to Marter to be sent secretly to the Vicarage, entreating Lady Ravenhold still to think over some plan of frustrating Sir Bertram. But Vanessa has taken a foolish idea into her poor, beautiful head about Kismet, and sits helplessly with her hands before her, and does nothing.

About noon the following day, Thursday, Susan comes hurrying to her with a telegram. When Vanessa sees it, that awful terror comes over her with which an orange envelope afflicts most women who are unfortunate enough to love absorbingly some other mortal. In one instant she sees Gerard, stiff, stark dead. She sees as much, goes through as much as the drowning

man is supposed to do. Yet she tears it open with mad haste to know the worst at once.

"From Mrs. Fane, Grosvenor Place, etc., etc.

"Pray come to me to-morrow. Important family business. Am sending for Gerard. My own affairs. Telegraph back."

Vanessa reads it once to see that nothing is wrong with her darling. She reads it a second and a third time, to get the sense of it into her head.

Susan has been watching her anxiously: first her terrified expression, then the gradual relaxing of her features.

Susan has not felt any alarm herself. She is confident it is in some way connected with Miss Vaughan's letter. She is ready to persuade her young lady to start off on any journey at once.

Vanessa looks a little bit perplexed, although a delightful sensation is stealing through her heart. To see Gerard to-morrow—Gerard without her rival!

"I cannot understand," she says, thoughtfully, tapping her lip with the telegram, and looking at Susan. "Mrs. Fane wants me to go off to her at once, to-morrow, on some important family business."

"Why, deary me!" ejaculates Susan, who has a considerable amount of tact. "Well, it *must* be important, if she wants you to go all that way back again in such a hurry!"

Vanessa's thoughts fly to Mr. Anson—Giles Fane—a separation—a divorce. She hardly sees why her presence should be needed, but then she knows nothing whatever of such matters.

"I suppose it is," she says. "But I don't like leaving papa in this sort of way, and you, Susan," affectionately.

"Oh, my dear," replies Susan, "don't you think of that; your first duty is to your husband now, and to attend to his wishes and his family's. Besides, you'll be coming back again. I don't expect they'll be wanting you for very long. The man's waiting for an answer. I've set him down to some bread and cheese and a glass of ale."

Vanessa cogitates. The more she thinks of it, the more it seems her duty to go; the more pleasant seems the duty. Here is an unexpected way out of her misery. Is not this the hand of Providence? Oh, how devoutly she thanks God in her heart!

Yes, she will go.

"Perhaps I ought to go," she says to Susan, feigning a slight reluctance.

"Do you so, my dear," answers Susan, who, when she is moved on behalf of her nursling, always forgets her title.

So Vanessa joyfully sends answer:

"Will go to you to-morrow by eleven train."

Then she writes a note to the innkeeper to send her over a carriage two hours earlier than she requires it next morning to be sure of its not failing her, and gives it with the telegram to the messenger.

When he is gone, Susan, for the first time, broaches a subject that she has thought of from the outset.

"Well, my lady," she observes, "it is quite certain that you can't take that journey alone, and, as far as I can see, there's no one but me to go with you."

"My dear, ridiculous old creature," laughs Vanessa, who is quite a changed being since the telegram came, "what an idea! What harm could come to me?"

"First place, it wouldn't be befitting your ladyship's rank to travel alone," observes Susan, with an important air, "and in the second, I would no more have you travel alone than—than I'd ride on an ingen in myself."

Vanessa laughs.

"I should delight to take you," she says, "but how about poor papa?"

"Oh, Hepzibah can do all that master will want, and I'll get Mary Ann just to run down. Not but what I could come back same night or next morning."

"Why, then I should have to come back to see *you* safe," laughs Vanessa. "But, really, Susy, I should like of everything to show you London, so we will ask papa's leave."

When the vicar is told of his daughter's departure, he assents so cheerfully and with such an unconscious air of relief that Vanessa, though she smiles, is the least bit inclined to cry too. She dispatches a note secretly to Edith (whom she never for one instant suspects of being her *Deus ex machina*) relating this marvelous intervention of Providence.

And next day she starts joyously on her journey, whilst poor Susan is nearly dead with fright, never having seen a train before. Half of her journey is occupied in repeating to herself a verse out of the litany which prays for delivery from battle, murder, and sudden death. Hermione meets Vanessa with the brougham in London, and, as both ladies are anxious for the welfare of Susan, the footman goes inside the cab to take care of and to reassure her.

Hermione says not one word about family affairs until she and Vanessa have drunk tea in her boudoir. Then suddenly she comes and sits on an ottoman beside her, and, putting one arm round her, says:

"What will you say when I tell you that my 'family affairs' are only a *ruse* to get you here? Hush!" as Vanessa's astonished lips unclose. "It is a little bit of wickedness on my part, and you will have to assist me in the farce. I want to be revenged on Mildred. She has been plotting to get asked to Sir Bertram's just as she plotted about the *Voyageuse*, in order to vex you. Don't you trouble your dear head! Gerard does not care a fig for her—he will be delighted not to be there with her, and only think"—clapping her hands—"only think what she will feel when she finds herself there *alone*!"

"But," utters Vanessa, her breath almost taken away, "how do you know all this?"

"Gerard told me; he was quite bored at the thought of her going to the Hall."

The last statement is a mixture of truth and mendacity. It had been arranged all along that Gerard was to sleep in Gros-

venor Place on this night, because the double journey could not be made in one day, but it was only this morning she had a letter from him saying he was going to take Lady Mildred down to Sir Bertram's.

"But now," continues Hermione, gleefully, "Gerard has to be hoodwinked." And she proceeds to impart to Vanessa her plan for throwing dust in his eyes.

Lady Ravenhold is put to bed; a very wise precaution after the fatigue of her long journey. Susan is installed as nurse and watcher. Scarcely are all arrangements complete, when his lordship's hansom dashes up. When Hermione has talked to him for half a minute, he turns so deathly white that she has to reassure him much more than she intended; but he is off like lightning up-stairs. Unmindful of Susan or of any fear of agitating the invalid, he catches her in his arms, he strains her to his heart, and she, like a foolish, loving woman, cries because she is so happy.

He forgets all about Lady Mildred—he can hardly sit through dinner with his sister, so anxious is he to be back with his wife; it is indeed a renewal of love. Lady Mildred's name is never mentioned—there is nothing but smiles, hand-claspings, kisses.

Suddenly his lordship bethinks him of Lady Mildred, and that common decency requires him to notify her of the change in his movements. He goes off down-stairs to write his note, and sends Hermione up to Vanessa. The little lady dances a waltz expressive of delight in front of the bed.

"Now," she cries, "if ever you dare to let out to Gerard, in a foolish moment of confidence, the truth about this, I will never help you again as long as I live!"

The sympathetic reader will imagine Lady Mildred's feelings as she read the following note:

"DEAR MILLY,—I found my poor dear wife ill in bed when I arrived. Thank God she is not in any danger. I shall now, of course, not be able to be your escort to-morrow, and it is not at all likely that we shall go to Blankshire at present. I hope you will have a pleasant time, and find some cheery people in the house.

Yours,

"RAVENHOLD."

This time it was unquestionably Vanessa's turn.

CHAPTER XXXV.

AUGUST, September, October, are past and gone—November is here.

Lord and Lady Ravenhold are at Dallas Park. How fares it with them? Has the reconciliation in Grosvenor Place been lasting? do they understand each other better? have they become thoroughly united? is Gerard not so inclined to wander? is Vanessa less exacting? If I have at all succeeded in delineating their two characters, the reader who has any knowledge of life will be able to answer this question at once. I must reply to it for the sake of the tyro.

Alas, then, things have not gone well. He is bored and not s

attentive as he should be—she is more exacting than ever and very unhappy. No one could say he is unkind to her—at such a time he would feel that any unkindness would be brutality, but he leaves her a good deal alone, and there is no doubt that when he departs from home he is as blithe as a schoolboy going off on a holiday, and that when he returns to find his wife ill and in tears, it has a very depressing effect upon him. He begins to entertain doubts as to the wisdom or happiness of the marriage state, and to think that a man who enters it with his eyes wide open is rather a fool; but then does any man enter it with his eyes wide open? or does he not rather put his hands before them and refuse to see? A lovely wife in robust health who could accompany him everywhere, of whom his love and admiration would be constantly stimulated by the envy written in other men's eyes and their covert endeavors to steal her from him; such a wife as that might probably still have kept him chained to her side; but though he admitted the necessity, the positive desirability of present circumstances, he was horribly bored and inconvenienced by them all the same.

Vanessa was in very delicate health, and had to be taken the greatest care of, and there was not much probability of any amelioration of her case just yet. So it was determined that they should remain at Dallas Park, and Gerard took violently to hunting again. This was the cause of great misery and terror to poor Vanessa, who was dreadfully afraid of losing a treasure from which, after all, she did not derive a very vast amount of pleasure. At the same time she felt the absolute absurdity and impossibility of attempting to keep him chained to her side, and suffered as much as possible in silence.

Lady Mildred was never mentioned between them. Once Gerard had let fall a hint that he had not been altogether taken in by her ruse and Hermione's, although at first it had deceived him. He often went up to town for the day—sometimes for the day and night, and Vanessa was tormented by the idea that he saw Lady Mildred there, but dared not tax him with it. When he returned he always showed her a long list of places where he had been, and seemed cheery and affectionate, as though the change had done him good. Every now and then he would grow restless and somewhat captious at home, and then a visit to London invariably produced a beneficial effect upon him. The fact was that he did see a great deal of Lady Mildred. He felt it impossible to give up her society, and, at the same time, he considered that it was positively a righteous act to lie to his wife on the subject. It would only cause a row and make her ill.

Never was a woman so transformed as Lady Mildred. Her passionate temper, her fits of imperiousness and ill humor had disappeared; she never sulked, never reproached him, not even for the awful ten days she spent at the Hall. She hated Vanessa with an undenying hatred—she had no scruples about injuring her; all she wanted was revenge. Vanessa had deliberately taken from her the only man she ever loved, and she would leave no stone unturned to get him back.

When Gerard came to her, she always remembered his favorite dishes, she collected all the news and every amusing story she could get hold of to tell him; she was a clever woman—"capital company!"—and she devoted herself entirely to his entertainment. And then she practiced that generally successful maxim, "*reculer pour mieux sauter*:" if Gerard gave any symptoms of the old feeling for her, she would say, sorrowfully:

"Ah, those happy days are over. You have a wife now."

Sometimes Gerard would have liked to reply, "Yes, confound it! what a fool I was!" but he restrained the words, and only uttered a deep sigh.

Lady Mildred had for some time past been hatching another plot—one that seemed likely to be successful. She did not breathe one word of it to Gerard, who might have opposed it.

Between four and five miles from Dallas Park there lived a pretty widow, by name Mrs. Warren. She was rich; she entertained well; she was a wonderful rider. She had, however, one misfortune. She married the deceased Mr. Warren twelve months later than the laws of society demand. Therefore, although all the men in the county knew and spoke to her, very few of the ladies patronized her, and she had to depend a good deal for society upon people she picked up in London. The unmarried men in the neighborhood dined with her, and were extremely civil to her. Ravenhold, as a bachelor, had been a frequent guest at her house, and had made love to her in that little way of his.

When he brought Lady Ravenhold home, Mrs. Warren had ventured to call at Dallas Park, but only received cards in return at the end of three weeks.

This was entirely Gerard's doing. Vanessa, who was kind-hearted, did not like to snub any one, but her husband said with decision that Mrs. Warren was not a person for her to know. Mrs. Warren, of course, thought it was her ladyship's pride, and took great pleasure in sneering at her and calling her the wine merchant's ex-widow.

Lady Mildred, happening to meet Mrs. Warren at luncheon one day in rather a fast house, and knowing that she lived near the Ravenholds, made a point of being extremely civil to her, greatly to Mrs. Warren's delight. In October Lady Mildred again met her at the shop of those celebrated linen-draper, the rendezvous for friends and acquaintances. She stopped, entered into friendly conversation, and invited Mrs. Warren to dine and "do a play" with her. Mrs. Warren was enchanted. She presumed to hint in the evening, knowing that Lady Mildred was a first-rate rider, how flattered she would be if her ladyship would come down to her for a few days' hunting, and Lady Mildred, perfectly conscious of the license that the fact of her being a duke's daughter gave her to do everything, *nearly everything*, that she chose, accepted frankly. There were other houses in the county where she might have stayed, but none where she could do exactly as she wished—none where she would have

been at liberty to see Gerard when she pleased and how she pleased. Mrs. Warren, she knew, would connive with the greatest delight at her flirtation, and she had conjectured, from the way in which that lady had spoken of Vanessa, that she would be only too delighted to mortify and annoy her.

So Lady Mildred sent down her horses, and the first that Ravenhold knew of her being in the county was when he beheld her arrive at the meet, perfectly mounted and equipped, by the side of Mrs. Warren. He did not at first know whether to be most pleased or most shocked; but, after a few minutes, he became aware that the former sensation predominated.

"My dear child!" he whispered, "what in Heaven's name has made you take up with Mrs. Warren?"

She looked him full in the face, and answered, in a very low voice:

"What in the wide world would I *not* do to be near you!"

Then she dropped her eyes and turned to speak to another man.

Gerard's heart thrilled. He never left her all that day. By Jove! how she rode! with what pluck, yet with what judgment! She was the admiration of every man in the field, and received the most flattering attentions, although it was known that she was the guest of Mrs. Warren. Even that lady came in for much more courteous treatment in consequence, and was radiant with joy.

Lady Mildred, though she had ostensibly come for a few days, remained, as she intended, for several weeks—no fear of her outstaying her welcome with Mrs. Warren. That lady played into her hands with the most perfect comprehension of her part—the house was free to Lord Ravenhold, and when he came he was certain of finding himself *tete-a-tete* with Lady Mildred.

It was astonishing at this time how often Gerard was belated out hunting, and how, on non-hunting days, visits to distant farms occupied great portions of his time. Once he went up to London for the night, but, as a matter of fact, got no further than five miles from his own home, although his servant drove him to and from the station.

At this time, no suspicion of Lady Mildred's presence in the neighborhood crossed Vanessa's brain. She was, indeed, happier than usual, for Gerard was exceedingly kind and affectionate when with her, which, however, was not so often as she could have desired.

There was some talk in the county on the subject. The women said Lady Mildred came after Ravenhold—the men were of opinion that she stayed on because the hunting was so exceptionally good. Men who are sportsmen are not generally given to scandal or gossip—they did not therefore tell tales at home about Ravenhold and Lady Mildred being inseparable in the hunting-field, and there was only one other woman who hunted, and she, being more like a man than a woman, did not bother her head with other people's concerns, and cared for nothing except to be well to the front. Still the women talked among themselves, although they were unanimous in declaring that it would be very

wrong to give Lady Ravenhold, poor dear! any hint as to what was going on. Of course they thought she knew that Lady Mildred was in the county.

Ravenhold was aware that he was living on the brink of a volcano; but somehow the excitement was not altogether unpleasant to him—anything was better than stagnation. He was puzzled about his own feelings toward Lady Mildred. He had heard and believed that once a man has got over a passion for a woman it never returns. And yet he was afraid, ashamed to own to himself, what a hold she had upon him—he could not bear a day to pass without seeing her.

When she talked of leaving, he implored her to stay—he even went so far as to beg Mrs. Warren to join her entreaties to his. Which that lady did in such an earnest and heartfelt manner that Lady Mildred found it impossible to refuse. One day she had a fall out hunting. It was not serious, but it so terrified and agitated Ravenhold that two other men who came to her assistance made remarks very freely to each other as they rode away. Her ladyship did not hunt for some days afterward, and then Gerard always went home after the first kill—not home, at least, but to Mrs. Warren's house, where he sat for hours beside Lady Mildred, who was laid on the sofa appareled in the rich colors that so well became her dark eyes and hair. Often, often as he went home, remorse pricked him—he felt as if he were under the influence of some devilish fascination, and yet he could not tear himself away from it.

A few days after Lady Mildred's fall, a neighbor of Lady Ravenhold's came to call on her. She was a lady not distinguished for tact.

"I hear that was rather a nasty fall Lady Mildred had," she remarked in the course of conversation.

"Lady Mildred!" repeated Vanessa, turning deathly white.

Her visitor felt exceedingly confused.

"I do not think it is at all serious," she hastened to say, appearing not to notice the change in Lady Ravenhold. Vanessa made an immense effort over herself.

"You mean Lady Mildred Belair," she remarked, quietly. "Where is she staying?"

"With Mrs. Warren. So odd of her. Of course, no one calls on her there. How can they?"

"Yes," said Vanessa. "And she has been there some time," speaking as though she were already aware of the fact.

"About five weeks, I suppose," replied the visitor, taken off her guard.

When she was alone again, Vanessa sat for a long time perfectly still. She knew that she must be calm; she dared not agitate herself.

"It is all over, all over!" she kept murmuring, in a low voice.

"Oh, my God! what have I done to deserve this?"

How should she meet Gerard? She knew she could not speak to him on the subject without violent emotion, and she knew that she could not meet him and keep silence. Then she remem-

bered that Hermione was in London, and dispatched a telegram begging her in urgent terms to come at once.

Then she went to her own room and wrote a few lines to her husband, bidding him not to attempt to see her until she sent for him. "I have telegraphed to Hermione to come at once," she concluded.

As he read the note, Ravenhold's face blanched: he went and leaned against the chimney-piece. The thunderbolt had fallen. What a cursed fool he had been to press Milly to stay! He might have known this would happen. Should he send off a line at once imploring her to leave the county? But it was fifty to one if she would go, however much he might entreat her—she hated his wife so desperately; she was capable of doing anything to spite her.

Presently he rang the bell, and inquired if any one had called that afternoon. When he heard the name of the visitor, he was tolerably certain how the catastrophe had come about. Next morning he did not go hunting, but dawdled about the stables and grounds, without making any attempt to see Vanessa. At first he thought of going to the station to meet his sister, but why betray himself until he knew how far he was inculpated? how much was discovered?

At one o'clock Hermione arrived, and went at once to Vanessa's room. And then poor Vanessa, unable to restrain herself longer, cried her heart out on the breast of that sympathizing little lady, who as yet was ignorant of what calamity had befallen.

When, between sobs and tears, Vanessa told her story, and declared that, whatever the consequences, she would leave home, and never see Gerard more unless he swore not so much as to set eyes on that wicked wretch again, Hermione, though she tried to make the best of the matter to her sister-in-law, felt all her bosom swell with fury, and determined that these criminals should be duly punished.

And forthwith, going out from Vanessa like a lamb, she entered her brother's room like a lion. For even a very small woman, when she is inspired by righteous wrath, can be exceedingly terrible, particularly when her adversary is handicapped by a guilty conscience.

Ravenhold, though passionate, like herself, hung his head, and had nothing to say. What was the use of lying to Hermione, whom it was impossible to hoodwink or deceive, on this subject at all events? His only defense was that he did not know Lady Mildred was coming into the county until he saw her there, and that he had not mentioned her presence to Vanessa for fear of agitating her.

"Ah!" cries Hermione, with bitter scorn, being inspired by a sort of clairvoyance in her wrath, "it did not strike you that people would talk when you never left Mildred's side; it did not strike you that, when you were constantly away, and always came home late, that Vanessa would suspect nothing. If she dies, which is quite possible, you two are her murderers, and, though you are my brother, I will dencance you, you and her,

to the whole world. Are you human? have you one spark of manly feeling? I am ashamed of you. I blush for you. God forgive me! at this moment I think *I hate you!*"

Hermione delivers every sentence with telling force. She is wrought up to the highest pitch.

"And now," she continues, "you will swear on the Bible never to see this wretched woman again or I will carry Vanessa off with me to-day, no matter what the consequences may be, and you shall not see her again, if I can help it. My doors, I swear, shall be shut to you."

So Ravenhold, there being no other course open to him, swears on the Bible as he is commanded.

Hermione charges herself with getting rid of Lady Mildred. She pays her ladyship a visit that very afternoon. The interview takes place *a huis clos*. Suffice it to say that, on the following day, Lady Mildred, to Mrs. Warren's infinite chagrin, departs for London.

Not a word passed between Lord and Lady Ravenhold upon the subject of Lady Mildred. He, with his sense of guilt, scarcely dared approach her, and she held herself aloof from him. An unutterable sense of melancholy stole over her from which nothing could rouse her—not all Hermione's efforts, nor Susan's, whom Mrs. Fane had sent for. She was looking death in the face; she was certain that she would die, and she was trying hard to say that it was better so. How happy she had been! More happy than any woman had been before her, or would be after her. She had thought of, valued nothing but Gerard, and God was punishing her for forgetting Him. The Creator would not tolerate the creature being worshiped before Him.

There was no resentment in her heart against him now; if only for the time that remained to her she could lay her head on his breast and hold his hand and feel once more that they were all in all to each other, that no alien form stood between her and her love, she could, she thought, die in peace.

As for Gerard, he was terribly bored and dull; he felt utterly wretched; in his own eyes he was the martyr and victim. The very fact of his being unable to meet Lady Mildred increased his passion for her tenfold. There were days when he was almost tempted to brave all consequences, and to rush up to town to see her. He wrote to her every day of his life, and posted the letters with his own hands, and she directed her answers to a post-office four miles distant, and he fetched them thence himself. On those days when there was no letter from her he rode home moody, miserable, unbearably disappointed.

It was Christmas-day. A gloomy, wretched, miserable day indeed.

Gerard did not make the faintest attempt to conceal his gloom—he went about looking the picture of misery; only to see his face was enough to inspire one with the deepest melancholy. Finally he went to his room, and locked himself in to write to Lady Mildred. He was not particularly fond of letter-writing, but to-day it gave him the greatest comfort to pour out his woe

and his wretchedness to some one who he knew would sympathize with him. Even as he wrote the first words, "My darling," his spirits revived. It was true she was not his own, but that did not take away from the pleasure of addressing her as though she were.

"How you would pity me if you could see me! I wonder what you are doing? Christmas-day is always detestable, but this is the most awful one I ever remember. It is three o'clock, and it seems as though it ought to be midnight. For company I have two gloomy, reproachful-looking women—I am made to feel like a whipped hound; every servant in the place knows that I am in disgrace. I would give anything I possess—I would give a year of my life to be with you for one hour now. However, thank God! this state of things cannot go on much longer, and when it is over, and there is no more chance of my being called a murderer, as I have been already by my sister, I shall throw off this yoke and do just what I please. Nothing then shall hinder me from seeing you as often as I please—and as you please. What a fool I have been! Oh, my love, if ever I have done wrong to you, pity me now, for you are indeed revenged. When, when shall I see you again?"

Your own

"GERARD.

"I am going out into the hurricane to post this. I would walk all the way to London to see you."

Having thus solaced his feelings, Lord Ravenhold starts for his walk. When he returns, it is quite, quite dark—he changes his clothes and goes into his wife's boudoir. She is lying there without a light, and alone. Hermione has a headache, and has betaken herself to her room.

"Come here, darling," says Vanessa, as Ravenhold enters, and in her tone there is all the love and tenderness of old days. It smites Gerard with a vague remorse. He goes and sits beside her, and she lays her head on his breast and puts her hand in his. She has so much—oh, so much to say to him, and yet she fears to begin.

She wants to say to him that she will not be here long now—she would fain tell him how happy he has made her, and that he must not reproach himself when she is gone; with her head on his breast, she longs to whisper that, if she has aught to forgive, she forgives from the bottom of her heart. And she would entreat him, if her child should live, to talk sometimes to it of its dead mother, and she has injunctions to give him about the last resting-place of her poor body, which once he loved so fondly.

But at the very first words she breaks down. With his arms round her, with her head pillowed on his breast, with all her idolatrous love of him surging up in her heart, the thought of leaving him is too bitter. She has but uttered the words, "Oh, my love, I shall not be with you long," when she stops sharply, and falls to bitterest weeping. He soothes and lushes her like

a child—he reassures her tenderly. But her words do not alarm him—he does not put any faith in them—it is natural, he supposes, that she should think and talk like this.

It is a long time before Vanessa can speak again. At last she conquers her agitation enough to say:

“Some day—some day you will know how I loved you,” and then her sobs choke her, and she cannot speak one other word.

It is on the third day following: Vanessa and Hermione are sitting together after luncheon. Vanessa has seemed brighter, more cheerful since her reconciliation with Gerard. A servant enters with the letters which have arrived by the second post. There are four for Lady Ravenhold. One is from Edith, and she opens this first and reads the contents eagerly. It is a long letter, and contains a great deal of family news. She has been staying with Mab, who is as happy as ever, though not quite so prim and censorious about other wives as in the first days of her marriage. Her grandfather is more unbearable than ever. Then she proceeds:

“Would you, my darling Nessa, be very, very much surprised to hear, after all I have said against men and marriage, that I am at last going to break my vow of eternal spinsterhood. I am not in love! I don’t think any woman can love twice as I loved; but one can respect, admire, look up to, and be happy in a man’s society without feeling the rapture and torment of love—love as you and I understand it. It is of no use my asking you to guess the name of my future husband. I had never met him when I saw you last. It is Lord B——.”

Vanessa utters a little cry of delight, and Hermione looks up. Vanessa tells her the news rapturously.

“Upon my word,” says Mrs. Fane, “she is a fortunate young woman. He is quite charming, and immensely rich. True, he is a widower, but both his children are girls.”

“I *am* pleased. I am delighted,” exclaimed Vanessa. “Dear, darling Edie! If ever any one deserves to be happy it is she!”

When Lady Ravenhold has read the letter three times through, she opens the others. The third is rather bulky—it contains two inclosures—one is a letter in her husband’s hand, written on the thick paper he always uses; the other is a common sheet, on which these words are written:—

“MY LADY,—I send you this letter which her ladyship dropped by accident, thinking it only right that your ladyship should know of her goings on with Lord Ravenhold.”

Vanessa sits for a moment perfectly still. It flashes across her mind that she ought not to read Gerard’s letter—she is half minded to throw it over to Hermione. Unfortunately, Mrs. Fane rises at this very instant, saying she must answer one of her letters without delay.

Then Vanessa reads. It is the letter which Gerard wrote to Lady Mildred on Christmas-day.

Some quarter of an hour later, as Hermione is sitting writing at her table, the door is dashed open, and Lady Ravenhold's maid rushes in with a white, terrified face.

"Oh, ma'am, please come at once! I'm afraid her ladyship is dying." In three seconds Hermione is by Vanessa's side. Susan comes running at the same moment.

"The fastest horse in the stables, in his lordship's buggy, to go for Mr. Wilson!" cries Hermione. Next she writes a telegram for a celebrated London physician, and then, in an agony of alarm, she returns to Vanessa. She sees the letters lying about, and by instinct picks them up and puts them in her pocket. As she does so, she catches sight of her brother's handwriting on one. "Your own Gerard" is lying uppermost.

"He has killed her!" she says to herself over and over again between her teeth. And when he comes rushing to her half an hour later with a white scared face, she cries, thrusting his letter into his hands:

"Do you want to know what has happened? That will tell you! I hope you are happy now!"

"Oh, my God!" he cries. And then he stands speechless, livid, looking so like death itself that Hermione relents for a moment from her rancor and utters no further reproach.

When Gerard recovers himself, he is like a madman. He wants to telegraph for half the physicians in London—he goes on his knees to the country doctor imploring him to save his darling wife.

Vanessa remained insensible—convulsion followed convulsion. In the terrible anxiety about the mother, no one recked anything of the dead heir.

Ravenhold, when he was not hanging over his wife's insensible form, sat in his own room, his chest well-nigh rent with the groans and tearless sobs that are so terrible to hear from a strong man. He would cut off his right hand to save her now; he would give—not one—but ten years of his life for hers.

But she was not to live; they broke it to him as tenderly as possible, but the fiat had gone forth—she was dying. He fell on his knees and besought God to let her know him once more, speak to him once more; he would have bribed his Creator with the promise of giving up everything he valued in the world to let him hear from his wife's lips that she forgave him.

But she died and made no sign, and he felt that he had murdered her. In his agony he could have proclaimed his guilt aloud; he longed to expiate if possible some part of his sin by confessing it; by calling down on his head the scorn and hatred of men. Hermione, seeing his state and hearing the wildness of his words, persuaded the doctor to give him a powerful sedative.

He slept long and heavily. It was nearly midday on the morrow when he woke. He would not touch food, but went straight to her room. It was darkened. Susan sat there watching her dead darling; the tears coursing down her cheeks, her lips moving in prayer.

Not that her young lady needed prayers—she was one of God's angels now.

When Ravenhold entered, she rose softly, and went out, having unclosed the shutter a little way. She knew nothing of the truth, and felt only the deepest pity for the poor, broken-hearted young husband.

Gerard went and stood beside his dead wife. He gazed at her, his breast heaving with great sighs. She was more beautiful in death even than in life. Oh, God! and he could neglect and be indifferent to such an angel! She was like purest marble. Her hair was laid by loving hands all its full length beside her; on one arm he saw her little dead child lying; round her head was an aureole of white flowers; blossoms like the driven snow lay upon her breast.

He turned away and hid his face in his hands—the sight was more than he could bear. It was he who with mad, sacrilegious hands had plucked away his happiness—it was he who had killed the fairest and most loving wife God ever gave to mortal man.

In the deep waters of agony that flooded his soul he cried out that his punishment was greater than he could bear.

Hermione came to seek him: her anger had died out; nothing but pity for him remained. Ah! who could feel wrath in presence of that lovely, piteous sight—the fair dead mother, the little dead child?

"Gerard!" she murmured, softly and kindly—"my poor boy! come away now."

But he waved her off. Then she went away again with faltering steps and streaming eyes. Of a truth he was punished; his sin had found him out!

[THE END.]

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